

OTP

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Summary: With 'Charmed and Dangerous' set to become a movie, Alex is shocked to discover the books based on her life are wildly popular. Even more shocking is what some fans are reading between the lines. And most disturbing of all? Justin might be one! -JALEX-

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Title: *OTP*

Rating/Content: T/PG for consensual, fluffy, somewhat underage sibcest, and the occasional bad word or two. Jalex.

Summary: With 'Charmed and Dangerous' set to become a movie, Alex is shocked to discover the books based on her life are wildly popular. Even more shocking is what some of its fans are reading between the lines. And most disturbing of all? Justin might be one of 'em! Somewhat meta Jalex.

Author's Note: Yeah, so I know 'Justin and/or Alex go online and discover Jalex' is hardly original, but I've never seen it played straight before, and the plot bunny absolutely refuses to let me be. I'm also going to try something different this time: I'm far enough along, and have a good enough idea of where I'm going with it, that I'm going to try releasing chapters as I go, rather than waiting until it's done and posting it all at once. We'll see how that works out.

A word of warning for fans of *Doc Day Afternoon* and/or *Just A Little Harmless Smut* who have come hoping for more of the same: this one is gonna stay pretty PG, I think. Sorry. Next one, I promise. ;)

i.

Two months after that awful night in Transylvania, Alex walks into the living room, and Justin doesn't quite shove the book he's been reading between the couch cushions quick enough for her not to notice. Lounging back against the arm, he makes a show of staring vacantly at the TV as she crosses behind the sofa towards the kitchenette. She doesn't look at him directly, just out of the corner of her eye, and she can still tell how hard he's trying to appear nonchalant.

"TV's not on, egghead," Alex points out as she pulls open the fridge.

"I know that," he retorts evenly, after a beat. "I'm just...sitting here...trying to decide between the History Channel and the Nature Channel."

"Wow, even when you lie, you make yourself sound like a loser." Alex pulls a bottle of water out of the fridge and slams the door closed with the heel of her boot. "Are you seriously reading *Charmed and Dangerous* again?"

"Nooooooo," Justin protests. Alex raises her eyebrows at him over the water bottle as she takes a swig, and Justin's shoulders slump as he relents. "Well, OK, yeah."

"Geez," Alex says, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. "What's that, your third time through the series since we found out about it? I haven't seen you this obsessed with a book since Curious George went to the hospital."

"Hey, shut up! That book really helped me when I had my adenoids taken out, OK?" Justin snaps, digging *Charmed and Dangerous: The Story of the Lost Wand* out of the couch.

"I really don't get what you see in those books," Alex says, shaking her head. "I mean, I guess they're OK..."

"Uh, they're only all about us?" Justin scoffs, and he flushes a little in the cheeks, and behind his ears. "I mean...the later ones contain a lot of valuable information about what's going to happen to us in the future!"

"What's going to happen to *me*, you mean," Alex says, taking another swig from the bottle. "Because Julia is so clearly the main character."

"Max, Harper and I are all in the books too, Alex," Justin says pointedly. "Sam, Hayley and Alan, remember?"

"As supporting characters, sure," Alex nods, then shrugs. "I dunno, they were fun to read once, ...it was kinda neat to get Harper's take on everything that's happened to us, I guess...but I hated how cheesy she made everything seem."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Justin sighs, with a reluctant nod. "But what do you expect? Harper wrote them—er, *will* write them—and Future Harper is still Harper, after all. Anyway, they're still useful in preparing for what's to come."

"Oh please," Alex scoffs, waving one hand dismissively. "It's not like the future's written in stone, or anything. Heck, just by reading them and finding out what's supposed to happen...doesn't that, like, change the outcome, or whatever?"

At this, Justin actually plucks his nose out of the book and stares at her in something approaching amazement. What? Like she

can't have deep thoughts every now and again?

"I've seen *Back to the Future*," she says defensively, and it sounds a lot lamer out loud than it did in her head. Justin's amazed expression becomes tempered with skepticism.

"Forewarned is forearmed," he says, returning his attention to the book. "Better safe than sorry."

"A penny saved is a penny earned," Alex nods sagely.

Justin frowns and blinks at her. "Wait, what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Alex says. "I thought we were playing the boring platitude game. Do you realize just how much of an old woman you sound like sometimes, Grandma?"

Glaring at her, Justin takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, then goes back to the book once more.

"It might not hurt for you to read them again a little more carefully," he says patiently. "You might learn something. That's all I'm saying."

"Shyeah, so not risking that," Alex snorts, rolling her eyes. "Once was enough. I'll just wait for the movie, thanks."

ii.

Six months later, a film adaptation of the first book in the *Charmed and Dangerous* series is announced to be in pre-production at Walt Disney Studios. Sitting in the chaise lounge on the terrace, flipping through a gossip magazine, Alex is dismayed to learn the role of Julia has been claimed by an upcoming young actress by the name of Selena Gomez.

"At least people know who she is," Justin points out, squinting as he leans over from his own chair to scan the article. "David Henrie, who the hell is that guy?"

"But she's a total Disney-bot!" Alex pouts. "She guest-starred on *Sonny With A Chance*! She dated one of the Jonas Brothers! She did that stupid *Princess Secret Service* movie, or whatever! Ugh! It says here she was one of the *Barney* kids, for Christ's sake!"

"She's hot, though," Justin argues, admiring the accompanying photo of Selena posing on a red carpet at some awards thing. "I mean, *really* hot. So there's that."

Alex actually does a double-take at this, nearly derailed mid-rant, and cocks an eyebrow at him. Only because it's so uncharacteristic of him to openly be such a...well, such a boy. Not because she felt a momentary flare of something kinda sorta similar to jealousy at all, nuh-uh.

"She is not hot, she's lame!" Alex snaps. "Julia is not a Barney kid! She's the kid who used to make fun of the other kids who admitted to watching Barney!"

"Don't remind me," Justin growls. A good portion of third grade was hell for him after his classmates overheard his little sister mocking him as he walked her to school.

"Julia is supposed to be edgy! Dangerous! Chic but slightly bohemian in her fashion sense! Have you heard that album this Gomez chick put out? Gag! It's auto-tune crap for tweens!"

"Well, who would *you* have cast to play you?" Justin asks. "I mean, Julia."

Alex strokes her chin thoughtfully.

"Angelina Jolie," she says finally, snapping her fingers. "Or Lady Gaga. I'd be fine with either."

Justin snorts. "Um, don't you think they're a little bit old to be playing yo—uh, Julia?"

Alex shrugs. "Megan Fox, then. She's, like, Angelina the Next Generation, right? Or...ooh, ooh!...who was that chick who played Joan Jett in *Heartbreakers*? She was pretty badass in that."

"Isn't that the same girl from *Twilight*, though?"

"Oh, really? Bella Swan? Ugh, no," Alex says, visibly disappointed. "Well, what about the older sister from *Zombieland*, then? She kicked all kinds of ass!"

"I dunno," Justin says, glancing from the magazine to his sister's face, and back again. "I actually don't think Selena Gomez as a bad choice, really. I mean, if nothing else, she looks a lot like you. The resemblance is kind of uncanny, really."

"Pfft, she wishes," Alex says, even as she flushes a little. Only because the sun's come out, and it's gotten warm on the terrace. Not at all because Justin thinks she looks like someone he just used the words 'really hot' to describe, or whatever.

"And I actually kind of like her music," Justin says, indignant.

"Pfft, now *there's* a strike against it if I ever heard one," Alex snickers.

He scowls at her. "It's not just me, either, y'know. The fandom's actually really psyched that Selena was cast. It's been a trending topic on Twitter for two days. And in this poll we put up for the comm that I mod? They're voting four to one in favor of it."

Alex blinks at him, as though he's speaking in tongues, or at least the made-up dialect from his Alien Loser League. But before she can ask him what the hell he's talking about, Justin goes deathly pale, his eyes go wide as though he's said too much, and he tears them away from hers towards the sixth volume of *Charmed and Dangerous*, held open in his lap. His posture rather strongly suggests that he expects her to start mocking him incessantly any minute...which she absolutely would if, y'know, she had any idea what the hell it was he'd just said.

Instead, she leans back in the chaise lounge and sips on her lemonade as she flips the page, content to bide her time. Alex has always had a wicked nose for blackmail material, or at least material she can use to torture Justin. And though she's never been one to expend an undue amount of effort on, like, anything...or even a due amount of effort, really...the way he's squirming in his chair as he waits for the other shoe to drop makes her think it might be worth it, just this once.

Twitter. That's a computer thing, right? Like WizFace, but for nerds? (Well, bigger nerds, anyway?)

Yeah, OK. She can work with that.

iii.

Later that evening, after Justin has taken Max out for his first Flying Carpet lesson (and, holy crap, does she not envy either of them right now), Alex tiptoes into the lair and sits cross-legged on the recliner, settling the laptop she liberated from Justin's room between her knees. Booting the computer up, she's at first dismayed to find it's password-protected, and she curses her brother's anal-retentive paranoia that someone might actually care what he does on this thing. (Shyeah, as if.) But after a few anxious moments, she hits the jackpot on her fourth try with the name of the Channel 9 weather girl. She rolls her eyes at the little hourglass as it twists merrily in the middle of the screen.

Boys. So predictable.

Justin's desktop loads in a flash, and Alex is amused to discover that his wallpaper is the same red carpet photo of Selena Gomez that they'd seen in her magazine earlier. Huh. A new crush, maybe? It sure looks like it. She mentally files away that little tidbit of information to torture him with later.

(And, as she clicks on the icon to open his web browser, she tries not to think too hard about the fact that this is the "actress"—and oh yes, the air quotes are totally necessary—who he'd said looked uncannily like her. And who is, for all intents and purposes, going to be playing his sister in the movie based on the books that were based on their lives. Because, dude, weird.

Also...oddly flattering, kinda? But mostly weird.)

She starts on Google, typing in the few words she can remember him saying, like 'fandom', 'comm' and 'mod', which leads her to Urban Dictionary, and Wikipedia, and TV Tropes, then to LiveJournal and Tumblr, and gradually she begins to understand that there's some kind of online fan community for the *Charmed and Dangerous* books—several, actually—which Justin is apparently part of, and maybe even helps run.

Oh, wow. No wonder he was so embarrassed. This is way geeky, even for him.

Alex turns her attention to his bookmarks, to see if she can figure out which one is his. True to form, they're all neatly organized into folders and sub-folders by subject. She clicks on the third folder down, marked C&D, and starts exploring its contents.

She dives in with both feet, the same way she does everything. And it's a little overwhelming, the same way that the Hudson River is slightly damp.

There's just so much! Forums, blogs, wikis, social networking communities, fan sites...it's almost like there's this whole, huge section of the internet devoted solely to *this*, with (from what she can gather) thousands of people participating, from all around the world. From what Harper's told her about it, Alex has always been semi-aware that *Charmed and Dangerous* was wildly popular in some way—which has never made sense to her because, hello, they're books—but she's totally unprepared for just how wildly popular it appears to be.

It's not just the sheer amount of it all, either, but how dedicated—how *passionate*—the fans are that blows her away. They analyze the books down to the smallest detail, work together to fill in the blanks between the lines, share theories about where they think the story is going next. They post stories and drawings and comics and poems, even a few songs here and there. One guy even posts detailed cutaway floorplans of the loft, the Sub Station, Wiz Tech and Tribeca Prep that he's pieced together from their descriptions in the books. (And the results are so freakily accurate that it actually creeps Alex out a little to look at them.) Granted, not all of it is particularly good—in fact, a lot of it's not—but it's clear that a lot of hard work has gone into it, and if there's one thing Alex appreciates, it's hard work. (She wouldn't go so far out of her way to avoid doing it herself if she didn't.)

And then there's all the arguing. Over, like, everything. What character x really meant when they said thing y to person z. What really motivated person 1 to do thing 2, when any idiot with half a brain could see she should have chosen to do 3. Why a and b belong together forever, and everyone who believes b and c are destined for twue wuv instead are either completely illiterate, or certifiably insane.

(And for some reason, there seems to be an awful lot of that last one. *A lot*. Most of which seems to center on a character named 'Jalan', or something. Which is weird because, come to think of it, she doesn't remember there *being* a 'Jalan' in the books at all. But then, she was mostly just skimming ahead to the parts about Julia, so it's entirely possible she overlooked something, or whatever.)

The strangest thing about it all, though? Is that it's all about *her*. That this is essentially her life they're deconstructing, debating and generally squeeing over. (Well OK, their lives, really—Justin, Max and Harper are all pretty central to the books, too—but mostly hers. She's the main character, after all.) A million strangers on the outside looking in, judging her, praising her, damning her, and collectively sitting on the edge of their seats, eager to see what she's going to do next. It's humbling and terrifying all at the same time.

And also? It sort of rocks. Suddenly, Alex begins to get what Justin must see in all this. Knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that the world revolves around you is one thing, but having millions of readers willing to back you up on that? Awesome.

Without meaning to, she completely loses the rest of the evening to it. Not participating herself, of course (because, hi, nerdfest much?), just lurking and learning and generally getting the lay of the land. Eventually—after exactly how long, she's not sure—there's a muffled crash and some yelling from upstairs, and Alex realizes with a start that Justin and Max must be back. She hurriedly closes down the browser and slams the laptop closed with a curse, having intended to be done and have the laptop stashed safely back in Justin's room already, long before they were home. Now not only is she going to have to find a way to put it back without him noticing—although, given the hysterical fit it sounds like Justin is having upstairs, that isn't going to be overly difficult—but worse, she still doesn't have any clue who Justin is online, or even which community he's part of.

Alex grunts in frustration as she gets up out of the recliner and stretches out the kinks in her spine, then tucks the laptop under her arm and starts to creep her way out of the lair. Clearly, she's going to have to put a in little more effort—and ugh, there's that word again—before she can really put the screws to Justin.

Whatever it is he's doing, it better damn well be blackmail-worthy, that's all she's gonna say.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

iv.

Over the next several weeks, Alex becomes pretty skilled at sneaking Justin's laptop in and out of his room without him noticing. She even manages to add a few items to her box of Justin's favorite things in the process. There is one point where she fears he might be onto her, when the Channel 9 weather girl's name is suddenly rejected as the password, but she gets in on the second try with 'selenagomez', and she chalks it up to Justin's allegiance simply having shifted. (If there's any significance to that, she does her damndest to ignore it. Because, um, awkward.)

She starts out casually at first, only bothering when she knows he's going to be out late after school at Alien Lane-o League or hanging out with his not-entirely-uncool older science nerd friends. Gradually, though, trolling through Justin's bookmarks and history folder (once, duh, she figures out she can actually do that) becomes a part of her weekly routine. Eventually, part of her daily routine. She even starts to risk smuggling his computer back to her room while he's working a shift in the Sub Station or studying in the Lair.

Alex restricts herself to pages she knows he's been to, by following the dark links that he's already clicked. She pays close attention (well, close for Alex, anyway) to which user names pop up again and again in forum discussions and comment threads he's viewed. Little by little, she starts to chip away at the list of possible suspects. Narrows it down from a seemingly infinite number of people to just a couple dozen. And though Alex knows that's still a metric crap-ton of people, it still makes her feel like Nancy Friggin' Drew.

(And OK, so maybe it doesn't hurt that all this stuff she's had to look at to get to this point is still more-or-less all about her, just one step removed. Because God knows that if these were discussions about robots, or Captain Jim Bob Sherwood, or any of the million other lame things that get Justin off, she would totally have gotten bored and given up by now. And yeah, maybe sometimes it completely slips her mind to bother to try and figure out who he is, altogether. So what? Look, she doesn't have to justify this to anybody.)

As the days and weeks pass, despite her natural aversion to actually learning anything on purpose, Alex begins to get savvy to all the jargon, abbreviations and endless acronyms that the regulars toss around with ease, mostly thanks to the good people at Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary. And it's like finding the Rosetta Stone or, like, a *really* good Spanish-English dictionary. Because, honestly, at first it seemed like these people were speaking an entirely different freakin' language. Like, how the crap is any normal, sane person with an actual life supposed to know what the hell 'fanon' is? Or what 'squicky' means? Or that 'H/C' stands for 'hurt/comfort', one of the seemingly endless subgenres of fanfiction (or fic), which also apparently includes A/U's, X/O's, lemons, limes, crackfic, songfic, fixfic, slashfic, femmeslash and het.

The last few of which, of course, lead her to discover the whole concept of ships and shipping. Which is apparently an important nut to crack since, as she's discovered, a good 99% of the *Charmed and Dangerous* fandom seems to revolve around it, even though she definitely doesn't remember any big boats figuring into their lives in any significant way. (Well, except for that one time, maybe. *Snkt*. Dye in the hot tub, how awesome a prank was that? Ah, good times...)

Seriously, though...especially given that these are supposed to be kids' books? There appear to be a freakishly large number of people who are really super-invested in whom Julia ought be dating/kissing/swapping bodily fluids with. Like, unhealthily obsessed. In fact, if a character's had more than two lines of dialogue, it's a good bet there's somebody somewhere who ships it like burning: Julia plus her wacky best friend? Check. Julia plus her nerdy *alternate* best friend from Wiz-versity? Check. Julia plus her evil, blonde nemesis since kindergarten? Check. Julia plus the strange monotone woman who seems to work every place they go? Check. Julia plus the school principal with the cowboy fixation? Even that right there is a check, pardner. (And on that note? *Motherfrickin' ewwww!*)

But no matter how disturbing even that last one is—and seriously, *motherfrickin' ewwww!*—it pales in comparison to what actually proves to be the most popular, most enduring ship in the fandom. And that's about when things suddenly get super awkward, because that's when it finally dawns on her what 'Jalan' is. And, more importantly, *who*.

It's a piece of fan art that finally pulls the chain on the giant cartoon lightbulb sitting over her head. (The fan art being what she finds most appealing about all this, naturally. Judging from the links he follows, Justin appears to be more about fanfic, but reading has never exactly been Alex's strong suit. Or even her weak suit, really. Hell, she barely skimmed the books the fandom revolves around, and *those* were written by her best friend. Er, will be written. Whatever.) One minute, she's listlessly scrolling through yet *another* forum discussion of just how ridiculous it is for wizards to be completely helpless against plastic balls, of all things, and clicking a link in the signature of a self-professed 'Jalan-shipper 4 life, yo!' that leads to their deviantART profile...

...and the next, she finds herself staring wide-eyed at a full-screen, manga-esque, anatomically-correct representation of Julia and

Alan, half-naked and intertwined together on a bed, full-on making out.

Nonono, not just making out. More like rounding third base and charging for home. Hard.

Julia plus Alan. "*Jalan*."

Better known in the real world as Alex plus Justin, just one step removed. Check.

Alex shrieks out loud with shock and surprise, slaps the laptop closed with both hands, and physically scoots back away from it across her bedspread as though it might bite her. Then, suddenly acutely aware that she's, y'know, *sitting on her bed* (not unlike Julia and Alan were, just a second ago), she jumps up, sprints down the hall to the bathroom, and locks herself in. She spends the next forty-five minutes standing under the hottest shower she can stand, wondering how many times she needs to wash her hair before the shampoo seeps through her scalp and successfully manages to flush the naughty!bad!image out of her brain.

She's halfway through her sixth lather-rinse-repeat when a stray thought strikes her like lightning: the link that she clicked on to get to that picture? It was dark. Just like all the other ones she's been clicking on all this time. Meaning that Justin followed it. Meaning that he must have gotten an eyeful of it, too.

And, unlike her, maybe he *meant* to.

Though the water beating down on her is damn near scalding, Alex's entire body shivers at the thought.

With revulsion, of course. Disgust. That's what that tight feeling in the pit of her stomach is. Totally disgust.

Totally.

v.

The next day, at lunch, Harper stares at Alex in disbelief over the sporkful of soup she holds suspended in midair, halfway between her bowl and her mouth.

"But...they're brother and sister," she says with a confused frown.

"I know, right?" Alex nods. "But apparently, like, half the fandom ships them like it absolutely, positively has to get there overnight!"

Harper blinks at her over her cooling plastic spork.

"Wants them to get together," Alex amends helpfully. "And Harper, when I say get together, I mean *really* together. Like full-on 'insert tab A into slot B' together..."

Harper frowns as she processes this, then shakes her head slightly and drops her spork back down into her soup. "But...they're brother and sister!"

"Exactly!" Alex exclaims, slapping the table in front of her. "And that would be...bad. And sick, and wrong, and...and *bad* a couple more times! Right? Right. C'mon, Harper, back me up, here..."

"Wait, why do you care so much, all of the sudden?" Harper asked. "I mean, I thought you didn't even like *Charmed* and *Dangerous* all that much."

"Because I'm...concerned...about the...moral...fabric...of our nation," Alex stammers, improvising on the fly. "And besides, this is how my people are being represented in mortal fiction! How would you like it if we had mortals breaking cultural taboos all wily-nily in Wizard books, huh?"

"Oh?" Harper's spoon paused halfway to her mouth again. "What kind of cultural taboos do wizards have?"

"Oh y'know...wearing beards, robes, pointy hats...it's a whole big thing," Alex shrugs, waving one hand dismissively. "Anyway listen, I need an outside—I mean, an informed opinion...um, before I write a strongly-worded letter to my congressperson, or whatever. You'd have to be crazy to read between the lines and see that, wouldn't you? I mean, these are kids' books!"

Harper's brow knit together in concentration, and her eyes focused in the middle distance as she pondered the question.

"Welllllll....," she says, finally.

Alex sits up straight and grimaces. "Well what?"

"Now that you mention it, there *is* a bit of a strange vibe between them," Harper says, her eyes still staring into the distance as if she were replaying scenes from the book in her head. "They do seem to hug an awful lot, especially considering that Julia keeps saying that she hates affection."

"Uh huh," Alex says flatly.

"And then there's the way one's always tugging the other away by the hand so they can have these little private conversations, away from everyone else."

"Uh huh," says Alex, her voice dropping an octave.

"And you know that scene near the end of the fifth book, where they're alone in the jungle together by the campfire, and they're scared and all 'this could be our last night on Earth together'?"

Alex shifts uncomfortably in her seat at the memory. "Uh huh?"

"Well, heck, I knew they were brother and sister, and I *still* thought they might kiss!"

"Yeah," Alex sighs deeply. "So did I, for a minute or two, there..."

"Wow, y'know... the more that you think about it, the more it really makes sense!" Harper says, sounding halfway amazed at the discovery. She starts ticking off the tips of her fingers on one hand. "The way their love interests keep getting written out, the way their bodies keep flirting with each other whenever they switch brains, or whatever...ohmigosh, or that part in Book One, when Julia's wish made everybody forget about Alan? And their mom is all, like—"

"*You two would make a great couple*," Alex finishes flatly. She narrows her eyes across the table at her friend. "Are you *sure* you're not in any of these comms, Harper? Because it sure sounds like you *could* be..."

"Man, how did I never notice this before? There's so much subtext that it's practically text...like *Flowers In the Attic*, but with magic!" Beaming, Harper shakes her head at Alex in amazement, and giggles. "Wow, who knew H.J. Darling was so kinky, huh?"

Alex snorts at the irony. Yeah, she's not going near that one with a 10-foot pole.

"Bad kinky or, like, hot kinky?" she asks instead, in a small voice.

Harper blinks again, pulling a face like she's not quite sure what to do with that question. She slowly opens her mouth, struggling to form a response—Alex half-expects it to be "SEE YOU IN P.E.!"—when suddenly her attention is pulled away across the room, her face lighting up like a Christmas tree set on fire.

"Ohhhhhhh *no*," Alex groans, having seen that look before. "Harper, wait. Don't—"

"JUSTIN!" Harper calls out, waving frantically at him across the cafeteria. "He's really into *Charmed and Dangerous* too, right? I wonder if he's ever noticed all this? Let's ask him! JUSTIN!"

"Harper—!" Biting her bottom lip, Alex twists halfway round in her seat, to where Justin stands framed in the double doorway, staring right back at her like a deer caught in her high-beams. And even from here, she can tell he's panicking, from the way his hands go white at the knuckles as he grips the straps of his backpack, and how he's apparently forgotten how to blink.

Harper waves again, even more frantically, as though it's not completely obvious that he's already seen them. "JUS—"

And then he's gone, darting back out into the hallway so fast that he practically leaves behind a Justin-shaped cloud of dust in his wake. Alex stares after him, crestfallen. Her heart crashes down from where it had been beating painfully in her throat, drops straight through her ribcage, and lands in the pit of her stomach with an almost-audible splash.

OK, so maybe she should have been a *little* more careful to put the laptop back exactly where he'd left it when she'd returned it last night, instead of just tossing it onto his bed from the doorway. And maybe she should've, um, shut down the browser first so *that* picture wouldn't be the very first thing he saw the second he turned the computer on. But that would have meant looking at it again, and she's not sure she could've handled that, even for the few seconds it would have taken to close the window. Hell, the brief glimpse she did get had been more than enough to do a serious number on her dreams.

(Which had been about Alan and Julia, of course, the totally fictional characters. Not at all about Alex and Justin, the totally *un-*

fictional brother and sister. And OK, so maybe the line between the two is so fine that it's practically non-existent...but given the former is just creepy, while the latter is so wrong that it would require either a really powerful memory charm, or a whole mess of really expensive therapy, she clings to it like her life depends on it. Because, ugh.)

"Um, you OK?" Harper asks, as Alex closes her eyes and shudders at the thought. (In disgust. Total disgust. Totally.)

"Swell," Alex grunts, scrubbing at her eyes with the heels of her palms. "My brother just thinks I'm a complete freak of nature, is all."

(And he might not be entirely wrong on that score, either, she doesn't say. Because, goddamn, those dreams...)

"Pfft," Harper sighs, rolling her eyes as she turns her attention back to her soup. "So what else is new?"

Alex pulls her hands away from her eyes, thinking back to the way she woke up this morning, with her sheets tangled and sweaty around her, her nightshirt bunched up around her waist, her hand pressed between her thighs...

"Trust me, Harper," she insists. "This is new."

(Isn't it?)

vi.

Alex makes a habit of avoiding Justin for the next several days, which is made easier by the fact that he appears to be going out of his way to avoid her just as much. They take turns finding excuses to leave for school early in the morning, to stay late afterwards (OK, so for Alex it's usually not so much an excuse as a detention she isn't able to talk her way out of, but whatever), or to miss dinner entirely. They take opposite shifts at the Sub Station. Justin moves his stupid self-imposed bedtime up by a half hour without explanation, and Alex waits until after he's gone to bed to shower. It's ironically the most co-operative and accommodating they've been in the seventeen years they've known each other.

As days drag into weeks, Alex starts to wonder how long it's going to take for their parents to catch on and ask what's up. Judging from the expressions on their faces, though, they just seem to be happy for the peace and quiet, and they're not willing to jinx it.

One afternoon in the lair, Max lets it slip that Justin has been researching a series of impenetrable security charms for his bedroom door. And though she has absolutely no intention of borrowing his laptop again, the criminal mastermind in Alex knows that she simply cannot let this stand. She waits until Wednesday, when she knows he and Zeke are at Idiot Language League, then simply uses the IPP to drop herself into his room ("*Bedroom: Russo, Justin Vincenzo Pepe*") and bypasses the door altogether.

She spends a leisurely half-hour selecting new items for her *Box of Justin's Favorite Things From His Room*—and returning some that she's grown bored with, if only so he'll realize she was there—but cuts his laptop a wide berth, making sure to leave it untouched and exactly the way he left it. (And it's not like the curiosity kills her the whole time, either, because she is so done with that whole scheme. *Totally.*)

Naturally, he comes home and he's furious once he discovers that his mint condition copy of *Captain Jim Bob Sherwood Adventures #162* has not only reappeared on his dresser after having been missing for six months, but is no longer mint condition, owing to the soda-can ring that's since been stained on its cover. Alex feigns ignorance, of course, and Justin freaks out on her anyway ("*WHY WOULD YOU EVEN REMOVE IT FROM ITS PROTECTIVE MYLAR BAG?*"), and their parents sigh and give each other a look that says it was nice while it lasted. And Alex goes to bed happy for the first time in weeks, because it feels like things are finally back to normal.

Except...

One of the things Alex takes from Justin's room is his personally annotated copy of the first *Charmed and Dangerous* book, strictly because she now knows just how much he truly loves the series. It's called her box of Justin's favorite things for a reason, after all. Somehow, though, the book never actually makes it into the box.

"It might not hurt for you to read them again a little more carefully. You might learn something. That's all I'm saying."

Dammit, but she hates it when Justin's right, even when he doesn't know it. Driven to know exactly what the hell it is that people are reading in these books to make them think she and her brother are hot for each other—and halfway not believing herself what she's about to do in order to find out—Alex cracks it open at page one and starts to reread it.

That's right, not just read. *Reread*. As in 'read a second time'. Which is a pretty big deal, given that she hasn't read a book more

than once since *The Pokey Little Puppy*. This time she even forces herself to pay attention to the parts that don't focus on Julia. And even though it's written at, like, a sixth grade reading level...dude, it is seriously hard!

Surprisingly, Justin's notes help, scribbled in the margins in his careful hand, equal parts critique, analysis and commentary. She hears his voice in her head as she reads them, and from the slant of the letters or how hard he's pressed his pencil into the page, she knows exactly how annoyed or amused he should sound. It's as if he's reading it along with her, like when they were little and she'd curl up next to him, her head tucked under his chin while he read Dr. Seuss to her, feeling warm and safe and loved even as they argued. (Alex adored the Cat in the Hat, thought he was *hilarious*. Justin sided pretty firmly with the fish that he was just plain no good.)

That, combined with the fact that the book is more or less a memoir of all their past adventures with the serial numbers filed off, wraps her in a snug little cocoon of nostalgia. And, y'know, it's not entirely unpleasant, if in an *'OMG this is the most boring thing I've ever done on purpose'* kind of way.

She starts taking the book with her everywhere, hiding it in her backpack or magically shrinking it down to stuff in her purse, reading it on the sly whenever she's alone, and nobody's looking. Because God forbid Alex Russo be caught reading an actual book, which might actually be a sign that the world was coming to an end. And yeah, so the first chapter is a bit of a slog and maybe it takes her a while to get through it...but at least this time, the parts without Julia don't seem as painfully dull as she remembers.

Of course, Justin's notes quickly pick up on the whole subtexty sibcest thing, because he's Justin, and that's what Justin does. And Alex is more than a little bit relieved...because, Jesus, just trying to stay focused on the *text* is giving her headaches enough. Starting with Chapter 3, he begins to note (in his annoyed handwriting) the number of times Alan touches Julia's arm, or vice versa. Starting with Chapter 5, he starts keeping track of how often they hug.

With Chapter 6, in true Justin fashion, he breaks out the highlighters.

Pink highlights every passage in which one touches the other, while yellow covers every hug. Orange starts getting used for smiles in Chapter 7. Blue comes into play in Chapter 8, to denote every time one of them drags the other away by the arm to have a private conversation. Green is introduced in Chapter 9, to point out every instance in which their eyes meet, or one gives the other a meaningful look. And then he starts using purple every time one of them even thinks of or mentions the other.

Chapter 12, in which Julia falls victim to a devious genie and accidentally makes everyone forget who Alan is, becomes a literal rainbow of text. The part where their mother suggests they'd make a great couple actually earns an uncharacteristic *"WTF?"* from Justin in the margin, which literally makes Alex laugh out loud.

By the time Alex gets to the end of Chapter 21, a week later, virtually every page looks like a demented child's coloring book. On the last page, Justin tallies up the numbers, and the results blow Alex away.

"No normal brother and sister behave like this," Justin writes at the bottom of the page, in his angry handwriting. *"WE don't behave like this!"*

And Alex finds herself nodding in agreement, glad that he's not there to see it, because agreeing with Justin is something she tends to avoid on general principle. But as she flips back through the pages, stopping here and there to review some of her favorite scenes, she can't shake the feeling that maybe Future Harper is on to something. Because, for the most part, it's all exactly the way she remembers. And as wrong as it seems, it doesn't really seem all that out-of-character, either. She's always known that she and Justin have a love-hate relationship—or a love-antagonize relationship, anyway—but it's never occurred to her how it might look to someone on the outside looking in.

"No normal brother and sister behave like this!" she reads again, from the bottom of the last page. *"WE don't behave like this!"*

Alex hesitates a moment, then picks up a pencil.

"Sure we do, egghead," she writes back, underneath. *"We're not normal people, remember?"*

(Which, duh, is kind of the whole point.)

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

vii.

The days start to get noticeably shorter, the trees lining Waverly Place begin to change color and shed their leaves, and by the time Thanksgiving weekend rolls around, Alex is on the last chapter of Book 3.

Justin is still furiously trying to keep her out of his room—he figures out a way to somehow have his bedroom de-listed from the IPP directory, for one thing, but foolishly neglects to put any kind of charm on his window. So when Uncle Kelbo visits for Thanksgiving dinner, Alex talks him and Max into helping her with the wall-walking spell in the middle of the night, on the pretense of pulling an epic prank on Justin. Which is how she acquires books four and five, along with a poster of Selena Gomez (dude, seriously?) that Justin secretly has tacked up on the back of his closet door.

(And if she lingers a little longer than is absolutely necessary, because watching Justin sleep is oddly fascinating, Max and Kelbo don't seem to notice. Because, hello, it's Max and Kelbo.)

The books get much better as the series goes on, she has to admit, as Future Harper finds her voice. Some scenes are actually so vivid that they feel as if Harper has pulled them from her memory wholesale, and even Justin wonders in the margins if there isn't some kind of magic involved.

The books also become increasingly longer as the series progresses, which is both a blessing and a curse. Though *Charmed and Dangerous* is essentially the story of her (their) life, Alex still finds herself swept up in it, impatient to see what happens next. And each time she finishes one, she feels a strange sense of accomplishment. Like pride, almost. Similar to how it feels when she puts the finishing touches on a painting she's spent weeks on. She's still barely passing English, and that only because Harper does most of her homework...but in the last two months, she's read almost three whole books, cover to cover, one of which is almost a thousand pages long. She's never been able to say that before. And it's kind of...cool, in an '*only Justin would think this is cool*' sorta way.

And then there's Justin's notes, which probably add a good few hundred pages' worth of text to each book all on their own. And in their own, Justin-y way, they actually tend to be more interesting than the books, themselves. It's as if he's doing a behind-the-scenes commentary track on their lives together. And though Justin has always been an open book to her—well, to most everyone really, but especially to her—she's still surprised to learn things about him that she probably wouldn't have guessed at, otherwise.

He's hated every single one of her boyfriends, for example. Actually, "despise" is the word he uses most often. Not just because he's been intimidated by them—Dean especially, which she'd already halfway suspected—but surprisingly because he doesn't think any of them have been good enough for her. (Well, duh.) Mason, in particular, he actually uses the word "abhor" for (which Alex has to look up) because he knows Mason's the only one who's ever really broken her heart. (Justin swears that if Mason ever comes near Alex again—in wolf form or otherwise—he is "seriously going to punch that limey a-hole in the jeans." Which is oddly alpha-male coming from Justin, but he underlines it three times and uses two exclamation points, so she knows he means it. Plus, y'know, he very nearly almost curses, which is a big deal for him. And maybe that makes her mist up a little when she reads it. Like, just for a second. Or two.)

He's also way harder on himself than Alex would ever have suspected, twice as hard as he is on her. Yeah, every time Julia messes up—and OK, let's be honest, it happens a lot—there's a snarky little note from Justin in the margin meticulously outlining in great detail what she did wrong, and what she could have done to avoid it. And sure, he gets really annoyingly self-congratulatory every time Alan steps in to fix things. But those few instances in which it's Alan who screws up? Hoo, boy. Justin takes himself to task so fiercely that it actually becomes uncomfortable for Alex to read, sometimes. It even makes her a little angry. Because nobody—nobody—is allowed to talk about Justin that way but her. Not even him.

And the times when it's Julia who comes riding to Alan's rescue? Justin's notes are...chagrined. Embarrassed. Humble. But at the same time...proud. Impressed. Grateful. More than once, he notes something important that he actually *learned* from Alex in the process. Sometimes about magic, but sometimes just about life in general. And maybe that makes her mist up a little, too.

He's still seriously preoccupied with the whole 'Jalan' thing, of course—and, if Alex is honest with herself, so is she—but she notices that his handwriting gradually becomes less and less annoyed, and more amused by it as time goes on. Outraged rants become wry observations, and by the fourth book, it almost seems like he's actually having fun with it. At the very least, the idea doesn't seem nearly as scandalous to him as it did in book one.

(And, if Alex is honest with herself, it doesn't to her, either. Which is pretty scandalous in itself, so she tries not to think about it.)

He still highlights and color-codes like a mofo, though, because he's Justin. Amused or not, he's like a dog with a bone once he

gets going. She's gotten so used to it that it actually starts carrying over into real life. One night, about three weeks before Christmas, their knees accidentally bump together under the table at dinner, and Alex actually smiles at her plate and under her breath murmurs "Pink."

"What's that, honey?" Jerry asks, around a mouthful of ten-cheese enchilada surprise.

"Huh?" Alex blinks at him, then flushes as she realizes she said it loud enough for her family to hear. "Oh, nothing, Dad. Just thinking out loud."

"About the color pink? *You?*" Theresa asks, incredulous. She reaches over the table to press the back of her hand to her daughter's forehead. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, Mom," Alex sighs, rolling her eyes theatrically as she brushes Theresa's hand away. "It's for an art project, OK? Geez, just because I randomly blurt out a color doesn't mean that I'm sick, or something..."

"Not so fast, Alex," Max says, holding up one hand and getting a faraway look in his eye. "Paisley. Whoa, did you hear that? I think I'm coming down with it, too! Can I stay home from school tomorrow?"

"Yeah, paisley's not a color, Max," Jerry deadpans.

"Oh, really? Because I coulda sworn I ate that crayon," Max frowns. Then, his eyes darting hopefully from one parent to the other: "Um, plaid?"

Alex rolls her eyes again, as their parents wonder aloud what ingesting all that wax in his formative years may have done to Max's brain development, and whether or not they can make a case against Crayola. Then she sneaks a glance at Justin, who's been uncharacteristically silent through the whole conversation...and finds him staring right back at her, stricken dumb.

She feigns an innocent expression, then lightly shrugs one shoulder at him, asking him (in the private, unspoken language they've shared since she was three) what exactly his damage is. But even as she does, she can see the gears turning behind his eyes. And then Justin blinks, sits up a little straighter in his chair—if that's even possible—and ever so slightly arches an eyebrow at her, letting her know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she's busted.

She snorts and shrugs at him again, with a casual nonchalance that she doesn't feel, as if she couldn't care less. In response, Justin's eyes tighten around the corners a little, but seem to soften at the same time, somehow, which she doesn't think she's ever seen before, and for once she has no frickin' idea what he's trying to say.

"Hey, you two!" Theresa interrupts, pointing to each of them in turn with her fork. "Knock it off with your freaky telepathic stuff. You know it weirds the rest of us out, and your dinner's getting cold."

"Sorry," they both mutter, and turn their attention back to their plates.

Green, Alex thinks, but doesn't say. And she smiles, because she's pretty sure Justin's thinking it too.

That night, she returns to her bedroom (after having suffered through the annual ritual of watching *It's A Wonderful Life* with her family, and listening yet again to Justin whining the whole time about how unjust it is that Mr. Potter never gets any kind of comeuppance in the end) to find the last two books of *Charmed and Dangerous* sitting on her bed, propped up neatly against her pillow. Attached to the cover of Book Seven is a yellow sticky note.

"*FOR THE LAST TIME, STAY OUT OF MY ROOM,*" it reads, in Justin's angry block capitals, underlined twice. "*AND I WANT MY SELENA GOMEZ POSTER BACK!*"

Alex grins wickedly as she picks the book up off the bed and runs the tips of her fingers over the letters, feeling his frustration in how deeply they've been etched into the paper. Shyeah right, like *that's* ever gonna happen.

viii.

December 25th is the one morning of the year that Alex actually allows her family to wake her up before noon on a non-school day without threat of reprisal and/or bodily harm. She still takes a half-hearted swing at Max's head with a pillow, though, when he comes bounding into her room at six forty-five like an over-excited puppy, and drags her bodily into the hallway and down the stairs. She grunts in response as the rest of them wish her a Merry Christmas while she flops down on the couch, and gratefully accepts an enormous mug of coffee from Harper. (Who, annoyingly, is not only wide-awake but fully dressed in a menorah-themed outfit and cheerfully humming '*Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel*' as she passes around a plate of freshly-baked, Star of David-shaped cookies.)

Since it's Harper's first Christmas with the family, she's given the honor of playing Santa and handing out everyone's gifts. Which is a blessing, since it was supposed to be Alex's turn this year and she's barely conscious, much less able to actually read tags. Sipping her coffee, she watches over the rim of her mug as Max and Justin tear into their presents from "Santa Claus"—still carefully wrapped by their mother in a different type of paper than the rest of the gifts, even though they're all teenagers now, and it's been at least a year since even Max believed—when Harper lays a rectangular, encyclopedia-sized gift in her lap. Pulling her mug away from her lips for the first time since she sat down, Alex stares down at it, blankly.

"This doesn't look very much like the new Blackberry I asked for," she says flatly, "so either Santa's finally gone senile in his old age, or he went to an awful lot of trouble to wrap up a lump of coal."

"You just got a new cell phone six months ago," Theresa points out. "Maybe Santa came up with a better idea on his own."

Alex looks up at her mother, one eyebrow raised skeptically. "Yeah, the *last* time Santa 'came up with a better idea on his own'? We wound up spending spring break in Puerto Rico, reliving your honeymoon in matching polyester outfits. I'm not about to unwrap *another* orange fashion nightmare, am I?"

"Alex...just open it," Theresa sighs.

Groaning inwardly, Alex sets her coffee aside, and tucks her fingers into the wrapping paper at either end. She hesitates a moment, waiting to see what horror has been unleashed upon her brothers, first. But Max is jumping up and down and howling at the top of his lungs in triumph as he brandishes a white and green box over his head that she vaguely interprets as having something to do with his X-Box, and Justin is staring in wide-eyed amazement at some piece of Captain Jim Bob Sherwood memorabilia that he miraculously doesn't already own.

Oh, well. At least now she's sure there's no tropically-patterned clothing involved, this time. Sighing to herself, Alex shuts her eyelids and tears the wrapping off the box, then glances down at it and blinks in surprise.

"Woah," she gasps, before swiveling her wide brown eyes back up to where her parents are beaming back at her. "A Macbook Pro? Are you kidding me?"

"One of Santa's helpers may have noticed how often you've been helping yourself to your brother's laptop lately," Theresa says, lightly nudging Jerry in the ribs with her elbow.

"And given that he's likely taking it along to college next fall," Jerry continues with a sigh of resignation, "it's probably time you had one of your own."

"Yeah, but...seriously? A *Macbook Pro*? This is...I mean, all those really trendy graphic art students you see in Starbucks use them, and I've always kind of wanted one, but I never thought you'd...these things aren't exactly...I can't believe you'd really spend that kind of..."

Alex frowns as a sudden thought strikes her, and she begins to turn the box this way and that, examining it from all angles. "Waitasec, Santa didn't pick this up secondhand off a Craigslist curb alert, or something, did he?"

"Oh, if only he could have," Jerry says wistfully.

"Jerry..." Theresa sighs, rolling her eyes at him. "Trust me, mija, it's brand new. Top of the line and fully loaded, with everything an art student would need. Santa's head computer elf decked it out especially for you."

Alex blinks again, then looks over at Justin, just in time to see his eyes quickly dart away away from her, back down to the Captain Jim Bob thingee that he's cradling in his hands. (And judging by the way he's grinning like an idiot, and blinking as his, ahem, 'allergies act up', whatever it might be is clearly destined for a place of honor in her *Box of Justin's Favorite Things From His Room*.)

Rendered speechless for the first time that she can remember, Alex settles the box back down in her lap. Feeling oddly like Ralphie unwrapping his Red Ryder B.B. gun at the end of *A Christmas Story*, she pops it open, folding back the lid and peeling away a thin sheet of styrofoam, to reveal the iconic white apple and shiny, aluminum unibody finish.

"Oh!" she smiles, as she runs her fingertips across it for the first time. "It's *soooooo* pretty..."

"Now, honey, don't feel like you have to pretend you like it on our account," Jerry says quickly. "I mean, just in case you'd still rather have the boots, Santa *did* keep the receipt..."

And then he grunts as Theresa elbows him in the ribs again, not quite so gently this time. "Knock it off."

The rest of the morning passes in a blur, other presents shuttling in and out of Alex's lap with Harper-mandated clockwork efficiency. And though she genuinely appreciates them all—gift cards from distant relatives, a surprisingly pretty handmade necklace from Harper, a Justin Bieber CD from Max (which she can later exchange for something she might actually *want*, duh), and she *does* eventually get the boots she wanted from her mom and dad—none of them capture her attention quite like her gorgeous, unexpected Macbook does.

At least, not until Justin hands her a present with her name written on the tag in the careful block capitals she's come to know so well.

"Here," he says. "This one's from me to you."

"Ooo!" Alex grins up at him. She tosses the ugly green cable-knit sweater sent by Uncle Ernesto over her shoulder, then holds out both hands and wiggles her fingers excitedly. "Gimmie!"

Justin rolls his eyes as he passes it to her, then jerks his hands back as she tears into it with all the ferocity of a school of piranha stripping the flesh off a wayward, thirsty wildebeest, fearful of losing a finger. He watches in a mixture of horror and amazement as Alex destroys twenty minutes worth of pristine, meticulous gift-wrapping in three-point-two seconds, then looks up at him in askance as little scraps of paper drift down around her.

"Aaaaannd this is...?"

Justin rolls his eyes again, and points to the stylized white logo in the upper right-hand corner of the box. "It's a Wacom tablet, see?"

"Ohhhhhhh, it's a *Wacom tablet*," she says, as though she hadn't just read this for herself. "And here I thought it was some stupid, obscure nerd thing that only a complete dorkus like yourself would know what to do with..."

Justin grunts impatiently and yanks the box out of her hands, flips it over, then shoves it back at her to read. "Look. You hook it up to your computer, and it lets you create art right on the screen as easily as if you were drawing in your sketchbook or painting on a canvas. See?"

"Oh," she says, impressed despite herself, as she skims the description on the back of the box. "But why would I want to do that when I *have* a real sketchbook or canvas? Can't I just do it normally and, like, scanitize it in, or whatever you call it?"

"Tsk. Digital art is the wave of the future, Alex. What do you think all those hipster graphic design kids in Starbucks are using?" Justin asks in that matter-of-fact, know-it-all tone that's always gotten under her skin. But before she can retort, he adds: "Besides, this'll make it easier to share your work online."

Alex looks up at him, surprised. He holds her gaze for a moment before he glances away, his face flushing darkly in the lights of the tree. "Y'know, if you ever *wanted* to share your work online for any reason, I mean..."

"Waitasec, hold the phone," Alex says, narrowing her eyes at him. "You *knew* I was getting a Macbook for Christmas. It was *your* idea for Mom and Dad to give it to me, wasn't it?"

Justin shrugs noncommittally. "I *may* have put a bug in their ear. You'll need it for college soon enough, yourself, after you graduate. And I couldn't afford both it *and* the tablet. The Wacom was expensive enough on its own."

Alex tries to swallow past the ginormous lump that's come out of nowhere to land in her throat. And it occurs to her that whatever genetic defect that makes Justin such a ridonkulous nerd must be catching, because suddenly *her* allergies are acting up, too. Blinking rapidly, she sets the Wacom aside on the sofa, then stands up and wraps her arms around Justin, drawing him tightly into a hug.

"Thank you," she whispers into his ear, then impulsively kisses him on the cheek.

She feels his arms shift around her waist as he shrugs. "Hey, anything to keep you from stealing my stuff outta my room."

"Oh hey, that reminds me!" she says, releasing her hold on him. She turns towards the tree and holds out one hand expectantly. "HARPER! Where's Justin's present from me?"

"Here you go, Alex!" Harper says cheerfully. She tucks a long, neatly gift-wrapped tube into Alex's palm, and winks at Justin. "I wrapped it for her, you know."

"Yeah, there's a big surprise," Justin sighs, as Alex spins on her heels and hands it to him. Shaking his head, he carefully undoes the tape at one end, then—ignoring an agitated huff from Alex—gradually slides the paper off, careful not to rip it, until Alex

finally reaches over and tears right down the length of it.

"Gee, thanks," he says flatly, as he begins to unroll the gift in his hands. "It's an awfully familiar poster of Selena Gomez. With a handlebar mustache drawn on it in magic marker. Just what I've always wanted. However did you know?"

"Keep going," she prompts him with a grin, as she plops back down on the couch and puts her feet up on the coffee table.

He glares at her, but continues to roll the poster out, stopping halfway as he reveals a long, narrow strip of cardboard tucked inside, covered in black lettering. Squinting, he brings the poster closer to his face and tilts his head to the side as he tries to read it...then gasps loudly and actually drops it as he realizes what he's looking at.

"Selena Gomez tickets?" he shouts, bending over to scoop them up. He goggles at them in utter disbelief. "I didn't even know her band was coming to New York! Why wasn't I informed?"

"February 11th, floor seats, front row center," Alex says, her grin widening at his reaction. "I got you two on the off chance that you can actually find someone between now and then who *won't* be too embarrassed to be seen with you, but I guess you can always scalp the other one to some totally uncool third grader..."

Justin looks up from the tickets, scowling at her. "God, Alex...if you honestly dislike her *that* much, why'd you blow so much money on these?"

"Money? Pfft! As if I'd spend a dime on that lousy Mikayla wannabe. I *won* them, stupid."

Justin's frown deepens. "Won them?"

"Off the radio," Alex explains. "Although, technically, I used Harper's name, because God only knows who could be listening. You'd be amazed how handy *McCreary Timereary* is when you're trying to be the thirty-fourth caller."

"Wait, you did *what*?" Jerry sputters, around a mouthful of frosted Star of David, spraying crumbs and sprinkles everywhere.

"Tickets...contest...magic...cheating...*ALEX!*"

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

viv.

That night, sitting alone on her bed in her new Betty Boop pajamas after everyone else in the house has gone to sleep, Alex settles her gorgeous new Macbook in her lap, and turns it on for the first time. And though she's never been a computer geek like a certain somebody she knows, the gentle hum of its fan coming to life as it boots up is music to her ears. Grinning like a fool, she cradles her chin in her hand as she waits for it to cycle through the start up screens, then blinks and sits up in surprise as a dialogue box pops up, asking her for a password.

She stares at it for a moment, confused, wondering if maybe her dad *did* pick it up secondhand, after all. But then she thinks back to what her mother said this morning: "*One of Santa's helpers may have noticed how often you've been helping yourself to your brother's laptop lately...decked it out especially for you...*"

Smiling wryly, Alex sets her hands on the keyboard, and with her index fingers, pecks out *selenagomez*. And then she snorts when the computer accepts it and finishes booting up, its desktop configured identically to the one on Justin's laptop, right down to the Selena Gomez wallpaper. (Ugh. Yeah, she's definitely going to have to get him to tell her how to change that.)

Honestly, though? It's a blessing in disguise, because Alex doesn't have clue one about how to go about setting up a new computer. And in configuring it exactly the way she's used to, Justin's made using it fairly idiot-proof. Which means she doesn't have to go running to him every time she gets stuck. Sure, there's a couple subtle differences—his laptop runs on Windows instead of Mac OS, after all—but, for the most part, they're easy enough to figure out as she comes across them.

The first thing she does is plug in her new tablet and start up the copy of Photoshop that came with it, to try it out. Because, y'know, she has it on authority that digital art is the wave of the future, and stuff. Ten minutes (and a very poorly sketched happy face, that looks like it was drawn by a blind, retarded kid on a three-day tequila bender) are all it takes before she whips the stylus across the room and gives up in disgust. She clicks the 'No' button with extreme prejudice when the program asks her if she wants to save it before shutting down.

That's his idea of 'the wave of the future'? Shyeah, screw that. She'll stick with ink and paper and paint and canvas, thanks.

Angry at Justin for making her feel stupid, angry at herself for *allowing* him to make her feel stupid, Alex mutters obscenities as she double-clicks on Firefox, intent on updating her Facebook status with something that questions her brother's parentage. (And whether or not it'll include some breed of farm animal, she hasn't decided yet.) But she forgets all about that when the browser's homepage loads up, because it isn't Google as she was expecting.

Instead, it's 'julia_alan', a *Charmed and Dangerous* community on LiveJournal, devoted exclusively to people who ship Jalan.

Alex stares at the screen for a second, stunned, then looks over her shoulder at the wall that divides her room from Justin's, knowing that he's sleeping just on the other side of it, certain that the sound her jaw made as it bounced off the keyboard *must* have woken him up. Because, holy shit. *Holy. Shit.*

Did he make a mistake, she wonders? Like that time she left...*that* image...up on the screen when she returned his "borrowed" computer to his room? Screw up when copying the preferences from his own laptop over to hers, or something?

In answer to her own question, Alex shakes her head. No, this is Justin she's talking about, here. He doesn't make mistakes like this. He triple-checks everything, then checks it *again* to avoid making mistakes like this. She's heard him mutter '*measure twice, cut once*' to himself so many times, while building robots or mixing potions, that she's convinced it'll be chiseled into his tombstone someday. Which can only mean this was no accident, it was deliberate. She's certain of that. *Everything* Justin does is deliberate. Hell, 'deliberate' would practically be his middle name if he didn't already have two. He *planned* this. He *wanted* her to see this.

What was it he said, that day on the terrace, when the movie was first announced? Right before she go into the habit of stealing things to read from his room? "*The fandom's actually really psyched that Selena was cast. In this poll we put up for the comm that I mod? They're voting four to one in favor of it.*"

The comm that he mods. Which, she now understands, means 'the community that I'm a moderator for'.

And, holy crap, this is it. It *must* be. Which means he's not only aware of the crazies who ship Julia with her brother (which she knew), that he's not only one of them (which she already kinda halfway suspected)...but that he's actually helping to run the goddamned asylum. That he is the motherfrickin' Mayor McCheese of Crazytown. And, what's more, that he wants *her* to know it.

She stares at the screen for a moment, not quite sure how she feels about that, or even how she's *meant* to feel. Well no, that part's not true—she knows she *ought* to be slamming her Macbook closed and running down the hall to stand under the shower again, desperately trying to scrub the knowledge out of her brain, but she's way, way past that, now. Instead, months of curiosity—both idle and not-so-idle—take hold. Her finger quivering as she swipes it across the track pad on her Macbook, Alex drags the cursor up to the page's header, and clicks on the link that reads 'User Info'.

'This is the first and only community dedicated to Julia and Alan Rubik of the young adult novel series Charmed and Dangerous,' the info page reads. *'Membership by invitation only. **WARNING:** This community contains the theme of incest. If that bothers you, then I don't suggest asking to join.'*

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock," Alex mutters to herself as she scrolls down the page. She skips past the rules (naturally), past the list of affiliate communities (OMG, there's a Julia/Alan kink meme? Waitasec, what's a kink meme?), past the 'Interests' list (surprised that it doesn't include 'schtupping your little sister'), and stops when she reaches the community's admin listing.

Owner: fluidlamps

Maintainers: fluidlamps, archimedes, jlnpedia, more than a geek, redchihuahua, kowtows

Alex hesitates, chews on the inside of her cheek in a moments consideration, then nods to herself and starts clicking her way through the list, in full-on Veronica Mars mode.

From what she can tell from their profiles, fluidlamps and redchihuahua are apparently both chicks (or super-flamboyant gay dudes, which eliminates them either way). more_than_a_geek's doesn't specify a gender, but mentions offhand that they're posting from Mumbai, so that crosses them off. jlnpedia's profile says he's married, and probably old enough to have fathered most of the people who actually read his fic, besides. So, assuming they're all telling the truth—which, even she knows, is a pretty big assumption—that leaves either archimedes or kowtows.

Both of their profiles are pretty generic—kowtows even full-out admits that his is a sock-puppet account, since he doesn't want his friends and family to know that he ships an incest pairing for a kids' book, which would raise more than a few eyebrows—so Alex gets a little abstract and hits up Google and Wikipedia for a little insight on where their user names come from. Kowtows, as it turns out, is the name of a secondary character in the *Soundwave the Hedgepig* series of video games. Archimedes, meanwhile, is the name of both a celebrated mathematician and engineer in ancient Greece, and Merlin's pet owl.

Uh-huh. So *that's* a slam dunk if she's ever heard one.

Flushed with pride at having *finally* uncovered Justin's secret online identity—even if she halfway suspects that he actually meant her to—Alex actually gets up out of bed to do a little victory dance in the middle of her room, then settles back down with the Macbook in her lap. And wearing an evil little grin, she cracks her knuckles, settles her fingers on the keyboard, and proceeds to read every entry single entry on his LiveJournal, from beginning to end.

Or at least she tries to, only to discover (via the single entry that she's permitted to access as an anonymous guest) that he's "friend locked" it.

This gives her a moment's pause. A quick search on Google informs her that she'll actually have to register an account on LiveJournal, then have Justin add her as a 'friend', before she'll be able to read anything he's posted. And though this strikes her as being almost as geeky as registering for WizFace (ugh), she's come too far to stop now. Filling out the required form, she originally chooses the user name selenagomez_sux_and_so_do_u, and when that proves to exceed the fifteen-character limit, simply selenagmzsux. But, apparently, she's not the first LiveJournal user to express that sentiment, or even the tenth, since selenagmzsux1 thru selenagmzsux9 are likewise taken.

Stymied, she stops trying to be cute and resorts to doing what she always does whenever she needs a quick and easy alias: uses Harper's name, instead. But, knowing that Justin would not only reject a friend request from Harper, but might actually delete his entire account and run screaming into the night if he thought she'd figured out his secret, Alex adds a subtle twist to it so he'll know who it *really* is, without flat-out admitting to it.

And so, finally, at about twenty to five in the morning, she's registered on LiveJournal as future_hayley.

Hayley Finster, of course, is the character that "H.J. Darling" (aka Future Harper) based on herself in *Charmed and Dangerous*. And since Alex, Justin and Max are the only ones actually aware of this fact (which Max has probably long since forgotten), it oughta throw up a pretty obvious red flag to somebody with as big a brain as Justin. Hell, the only way she could make it any *more* obvious for him would be to use her own freakin' name. (And pfft, screw that. Who knows how many nerds from school have joined this geekfest? Alex has her reputation to uphold, after all.)

Satisfied with a night's work well done—well, all except for that wretched happy face, anyway—Alex closes down her Macbook and snuggles down under the covers, smiling in anticipation of the 'friend request accepted' message she's expecting to see in future_haley's Inbox when she gets up, eventually, sometime tomorrow afternoon.

(And sure, it occurs to her that pride and anticipation are probably the exact opposite of the emotions she should be feeling in this situation, but so what? She's just rubbing it in his fa—er, spiking the ball, that's all. Just like she always does. It's not like they're actually *doing* anything. Besides, what happens online stays online. Right?)

x.

OK, so maybe Justin's brain isn't quite as big as she thought. Or hers is just bigger than he's been giving her credit for all these years, and he really didn't expect her to crack his secret identity. Because, two and a half weeks later, future_haley's Inbox is still painfully empty, no matter how many times she checks. And she checks a *lot*.

What the hell? Why all but *tell* her his secret online identity, then refuse her friend request and keep her from doing anything with it? Mixed messages, much?

Ugh, boys. Christ, why are even the smart, nerdy ones such complete and utter idiots?

Annoyed beyond belief but unable to actually *say* anything to him about it (because even if they both know what's going on, and they *know* they both know, it's just not something they can actually *talk* about), Alex takes out her frustration on him in other ways. She "accidentally" kicks him under the table at breakfast, just as he's bringing a steaming spoonful of hot cereal to his mouth, so that he winds up slopping it directly onto his crotch, instead. She "clumsily" trips him in the hallway at school as he hurries past her, so that he belly-flops onto the floor in front of the rest of the Yell Squad, and lands on an extra-credit assignment he's just completed for Mr. Laritate's history class, a scale-model diorama of the showdown at the O.K. Corral. And, oopsy-daisy, she "mistakenly" sets fire to his stupid tie during wizard lessons when a new spell she and Max are practicing "goes awry", even though Justin's not taking wizard lessons with them anymore, and isn't even on the same floor of the house when she casts it.

Nobody else says much of anything to her about any of it, naturally, because this is hardly unusual behavior where Alex and Justin are concerned. Justin, however, gives her a puzzled look as he sits down next to her at dinner, smelling faintly of scorched polyester blend and bactine. Alex, for her part, pretends not to notice as she scoops some mashed potatoes onto her plate, then drops the spoon back into the bowl with a little more force than necessary.

"So Alex," Justin says conversationally, as he wipes a dollop of potato off the tip of his nose, "how's the Wacom tablet working out for you? Gotten any good with it, yet?"

Alex pauses with her fork halfway to her mouth, and glares at him. Geez, is he *trying* to add insult to injury here?

"What's it to you?" she asks.

"Uh, I've just heard they can be difficult to get the hang of, at first," Justin says, blinking uncertainly. "It's a pretty steep learning curve, apparently, like learning how to draw all over again. Even professional artists can have a hard time getting used to it."

"What do you mean by '*even*' professional artists?" Alex snaps, narrowing her eyes at him. "Are you trying to imply that I'm some sort of lousy amateur, or something? That you don't think I'll *ever* get good at it?"

"Alex, calm down," Theresa says, frowning across the table at her. "Stop being so defensive. Your brother's just trying to see if you like the gift he got for you."

Alex's gaze flicks from Justin to their mother and back again, before she drops it back down to her plate and shrugs one shoulder lazily. "I dunno, I haven't tried it out yet. To be honest, I haven't even used the Macbook all that much. I've just gone on the internet with it a couple times, that's all."

"Really?" Jerry asks, wincing as though he's in physical pain. "Because, honey, if that's all you're really gonna use it for, we could always exchange it for a cute little netbook for you. It'd be so much lighter, and easier to carry around..."

"For the last time, Jerry, we are not trading in Alex's Christmas present for something cheaper," Theresa says. Her frown deepens as she leans across the table towards her daughter. "Is everything OK, mija? You just seemed so excited when you first opened it..."

Alex shrugs again without taking her eyes off her plate, as she shovels a heaping forkful of loose corn into her mouth. "Wor omf, ah gueff."

Theresa exchanges glances with Jerry and Justin. "Do you maybe need a little help with it, honey? I'm sure Justin wouldn't mind showing you a few things."

Alex snorts loudly as she picks up her soda and downs it all in one gulp, then slams it back down on the table, empty. "Shyeah, somehow I doubt that Justin's interested in showing me anything," she burps, then wipes the back of her hand across her mouth. "Look, I'm done. Can I be excused?"

"May I be excused," Justin corrects her automatically.

"There is no excuse for you," Alex snarls at him as she stands up, sending her chair squeaking away from the table with backs of her knees. Whipping her napkin down on her plate, she turns on her heel and stomps towards the black, spiral staircase without another look back.

"Man, what's her problem?" she hears Max ask below, as she takes the stairs two at a time. "Is it that time of the month again alrea—ow!"

"Knock it off," Theresa snaps. "Harper, honey, what's going on? Did something happen with Alex at school today, or—?"

"No, I'm pretty sure this is my fault," Justin sighs, before Harper can answer. "Don't ask, it's a long story. Just a little misunderstanding. Don't worry, I'll fix it."

Alex snorts again as stalks into her bedroom and slams the door behind her, shutting out their conversation. Damn straight it's his fault. But however Justin's planning to "fix it", it better be good, because she is *beyond* pissed, now.

Throwing herself onto her bed, she nudges her Macbook aside with the toe of her boot, then reaches down to pull Book Five of *Charmed and Dangerous* out from where it's hidden between the mattress and the box spring. Snatching her iPod up off her nightstand, she jams the earbuds into her ears, turns the volume up as loud as she can stand, then pops open the book. Pulling out the paintbrush she's used as a bookmark, she starts tapping it against the cover in time with the music as she picks up where she left off: with Julia and Alan trekking through the jungle in the Caribbean together, racing against time in a desperate search for the legendary lost Crystal of Desire. And within minutes, all thoughts of Justin and his stupid mixed messages are...well, not exactly forgotten, but at least pushed somewhere to the back of her mind, as the book completely absorbs her attention. And if it's weird that, just three or four months ago, Alex Russo would have laughed at the idea of getting lost in a good book...well, it's been a strange three or four months.

Book Five is really good, too, easily Future Harper's best yet. Less reliant on cheesy slapstick, edgier and more mature than the others. Less episodic and more of a complete story with a beginning, middle and end. And even though she's hardly an authority on great literature, even Alex can tell how much more nuanced and evocative her writing has become. She actually feels her cheeks burn with embarrassment as she reads the rash and bitter argument Julia provokes with her mother that nearly proves to be their undoing, and her eyes fill with guilty tears when Sam begins to panic over his inability to remember what he got for Christmas last year. But the parts that touch her most—the passages she underlines, the pages she dog-ears so she can come back to them easily—are all the little moments between Julia and Alan. Cute ones where they tease and torment each other, bickering like an old married couple even in the face of utter annihilation. Quiet ones where they let their guard down and admit a grudging respect, even admiration for each other.

'Jalan' moments. And, boy howdy, are there an awful *lot* of them in this one.

Most of these, not coincidentally, have also been highlighted by Justin, his handwriting in the margins taking on a new, oddly unfamiliar slant that's neither annoyance nor amusement, but something new. His notes are so tentatively faint on the page in these places, it's as if he's barely touched his pen to it at all, unlike the passages where he admonishes her (or himself) for a mistake, and presses so hard that it leaves an imprint on the page beneath. They're also uncharacteristically full of questions, usually about what was going through her head in those moments. And though she knows they're completely rhetorical—another word of his she had to look up, way back during Book Two—she still picks up a pencil and starts scribbling little notes of her own, doing her best to answer them. And in the process, she finds herself admitting things she'd never say out loud to his face. Fear. Guilt. Jealousy. Gratitude. Confusion. Need.

This last one, though, she eventually winds up erasing, leaving faint pencil smudges all over the margins of the infamous "campfire scene". Because, seriously, ugh. There's honesty, and then there's *honesty*, and Alex has a hard enough time just with the *first* kind. Besides, if he's not prepared to lay all his cards on the table—or even so much as give her a peek at his damn LiveJournal—then there's no way in *hell* she's about to lay her soul completely friggin' bare. She'll show him hers when he shows her his, and not one goddamn minute before.

(Gah, did she *really* just think that? Jesus, it really *has* been a weird couple months...)

Distracted, seething with anger and curiosity all over again, Alex glances at the Macbook lying on the bed next to her. She hesitates for a moment, listening to Katy Perry screaming that she's a firework—Christ, why is this piece of crap song even *on* her iPod?—as she makes up her mind, then shoves her pencil between the pages to mark her place and closes the book around it. Dragging the computer into her lap, she pops it open and wakes it up, then logs on to check *future_haley's* messages, for what she swears is gonna be the absolute last time.

And, lo and behold, there is one.

Not the one she was expecting, not a note saying that *archimedes* has finally pulled his damn head out of his ass and accepted her goddamn friend request, already. Instead it's an invitation, sent by one of the administrators of *julia_alan*, for *future_haley* to join their perverted little community. Once she accepts, the invitation says, she'll be able to read everything its members have posted there, and have full posting privileges herself as well.

Alex blinks at the screen for a second or two, then turns to glance over her shoulder at the wall that separates her room from Justin's, understanding gradually beginning to dawn on her.

("Just a little misunderstanding," he'd said, as she'd stormed up the stairs. "Don't worry, I'll fix it.")

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh," she says quietly to herself. "So *this* is what you wanted me to do. Well, Jesus, egghead, why the hell didn't you just say so in the first place?"

(And OK, so technically he kind of did—he'd set her home page to the *julia_alan* comm, after all, and not his own, personal LiveJournal, duh—but hello, has he *met* her? He should know better than anyone that Alex Russo doesn't just *join* things, not unless she's forced to. And this whole thing about actually *asking* to be included? Pfft, that's something that happens to other people. *Lame* people. Christ, actually having to signing up for LiveJournal in the first place had been bad enough...)

Shaking her head in annoyance, Alex clicks the link to accept the invitation, which brings her to the comm's page. And—gee, wouldn't you know it?—the very first thing she reads is a stickied post which went up just over two hours ago, right before Justin's stupid, self-imposed bedtime:

Archimedes (archimedes) wrote in julia_alan, 2010-01-12 21:47:00

julia_alan rec meme

*Hey, everyone! Thanks to all the news about the movie finally beginning production (not to mention redchihuahua's awesome post yesterday containing those leaked photos of Selena and David being all *shuggly on-set*), *julia_alan* has seen a vast influx of curious and inquisitive new members. So what say we welcome them all aboard the good ship *Jalan* with a good, old-fashioned rec meme? Please contribute below in the comments, with links to your favorite fics, photos, vids, manips, art and fanmixes...or even just a rundown of your favorite *Jalan* quotes or moments from the books. Let's show them the best of the best that our bizarre little corner of the C&D fandom has to offer, and why *Jalan* is our OTP! :)*

Alex rolls her eyes. 'Vast influx'? 'Curious and inquisitive'? '*Shuggly*'? Uh-huh. So any tiny flicker of doubt she may have harbored about this whole 'Archimedes equals Justin' thing just got extinguished in big, bad way. (She doesn't understand most of the rest of what he's trying to say, including whatever the hell an 'OTP' is supposed to be—which, again, is Justin all over—but hey, that's what Urban Dictionary is for.)

She scrolls down to the comments, and raises her eyebrows when she sees how many responses there are already, despite how late it is. Either Justin's little band of perverts is ridiculously active, or they're just quick to hop-to when he tells them to jump. She finds herself grudgingly impressed, either way. Resting her chin in her hand, she clicks on the link, then lets out a low whistle as a second page opens, to reveal a long series of itemized, annotated lists of recommendations in reply to Justin's query, several of which appear to be links to *other* lists. And even though, skimming through them, she can see that most of them amount to little more than simple 'me too!' posts, there is still an *awful* lot of stuff here...

Alex's eyes flick to the digital alarm clock sitting on her nightstand, painfully conscious of the fact that it's going to go off in a little under seven hours, forcing her to get up for school. She glances from it, to the computer screen, and back again, pursing her lips, inwardly debating. Wisdom dictates that she should just shut down her Macbook and go to sleep, since she's already up too late as it is, and the rec thread will still be there tomorrow after class.

But then, wisdom has never exactly been Alex Russo's strong suit. Instant gratification, on the other hand...

Oh, what the hell? Checking out just one link can't hurt, right? Hell, if it's as bad as some of the gen stuff she was looking at before, it might very well bore her to sleep, anyway. Besides, God made the snooze bar for a reason. So she'll just check out the one. Just one. That's all.

Because, seriously. 'Best of the best' or not, how riveting can any of this crap honestly be?

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

xi.

"Rise and shine, little filly," Mister Laritate says as he pokes her in the shoulder, startling her awake. "Time to giddy-up. The two o'clock stage has done left town without'cha."

"Ngff," Alex grunts, then limply bats his hand away without opening her eyes. "Jus' five more min's, 'kay Mom?"

Mister Laritate harrumphs in annoyance, then pokes her again, harder this time. "Wake *up*, Miss Russo. Fifth period is over. You're due to go nap in Mrs. Thomas-Jayharper's class in five minutes, instead."

"Wha—?" Yawning, Alex forces her oh-so-heavy eyelids open, and is surprised to find herself staring down at the scuffed green linoleum tiles of the classroom floor. Disoriented, she lifts her head to get her bearings, and is surprised when her forehead peels away from the still-wet canvas on the easel in front of her with a moist *schluck!*

"Ohhhhhhhh *no*," she groans, her shoulders sagging as she blinks at the smeared blotch in the middle of her painting. She reaches up to touch her forehead, then winces at the red and yellow paint smeared over her fingertips. "Oh, son of a bitch..."

"Alex, what have I told you about airing your lungs in my classroom?" Mister Laritate grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest, just below the ends of his bolo tie. "How many detentions do I have to give you before the meaning behind the words 'zero tolerance' finally sinks in?"

"I dunno, but we're into triple digits by now, dude. I wouldn't be holding my breath if I were you." Casting about for something to wipe off her forehead with, Alex glares at the telltale smudge it left right in the freakin' focal point of her painting. Well, crap. Now not only is her latest art project completely *ruined*, just as it was practically *finished*, but by morning her forehead is going to look like a goddamned zit plantation. Christ. Oil paint in the pores is *such* a pain in the ass.

Watching her, Mister Laritate heaves a long suffering sigh, shakes his head, then reaches over to snatch a rag off the next easel over and gestures for her to come closer. Alex rolls her eyes, but steps towards him nonetheless, smiling sheepishly as he gently cradles her chin in one hand while cleaning off her forehead with the other. Man, if only RoYalFlush4—the lone, proud C&D fan who insists there's at least a one-sided thing between Julia and *her* principal—could see this. She'd be squeeing so hard, she'd literally be wetting herself.

(Seriously, though: *motherfrickin' ewwwwww!*)

"Alex, this may very well be none of my bee's wax," Mister Laritate says after a few moments, breaking into her thoughts, "but indulge an old saddle-horn's curiosity for a minute. How are things back at the ranch? Is everything OK at home?"

Alex blinks up at him in confusion. "Huh? Why would you ask me that?"

Mister Laritate grimaces and presses harder against her forehead as he works on a particularly stubborn patch. "I've seen you sleep through a lot of classes, Miss Russo...English, History, Spanish, an entire semester of Freshman Band...but never once in Visual Arts. Heck, sometimes it seems like art class is the only time I actually get to see you awake. But you've nodded off three times so far this week."

"I know, I know. It's just—wait, I took *Band*?" Alex purses her lips, her eyes looking inward as she struggles to remember. "Weird. Did I pass?"

"Barely," Mister Laritate says, one eyebrow raised, "although I rather suspect Mister Animartos took pity on you, on account of the fact that he owns a narcoleptic dachshund, and thus has a certain degree of sympathy for those who suffer from sleep disorders. According to him, though, you're a very nearly adequate sleep-drummer."

"Huh," Alex says, nonplussed. Come to think of it, she *may* have a vague recollection of rhyming '*expertise*' with '*catch some z's*' at some point, while twirling a drumstick on one hand and her wand in the other. "Y'know, I've always wondered where I picked up that whole drumming thing..."

"Indeed," Mister Laritate says flatly, as he releases his hold on Alex's chin and takes a step back. "Answer the question, Miss Russo. Why are you suddenly dozing off in the one class that actually seems to engage you, somewhat? What's the 'dillio', as you young people say?"

"Ugh," Alex winces, as though the principal's lame attempt to be cool is causing her physical pain. She worries her bottom lip

with her teeth. "Would you believe me if I told you I've just stayed up really, really late reading, like, every night this week?"

"Yeah, sure you have, Russo," Mister Laritate scoffs. "Now try pulling the other one. It has bells on it."

Alex blinks, and frowns at this. "Bells? What's that supposed to—is this another cowboy metaphor?"

"It means I don't buy it," the principal says pointedly. "Clearly, all you Russos work from the same playbook. Justin gave me the exact same excuse when *he* started falling asleep in class last semester. At least coming from *him*, it was believable."

"Wow, you caught *Justin* passing out in class? Seriously?"

"That was so not the key point of that sentence, Alex."

Alex makes a noise that's halfway between a frustrated sigh and a grunt of annoyance. OK, so maybe she can't exactly blame him for thinking she's lying her skinny jeans off. Because, really? Up all night *reading*? It might not be the lamest fib she'd ever told him, but dude, it would sure as hell be up there.

The sad thing is, though, that she's actually telling him the truth for once. Justin's stupid little 'Jalan' rec meme has captured her imagination in a big, bad way, sunk its teeth in and won't let go. She's been up past fuck o'clock every night so far this week since she found it, and she's *still* only halfway through. And people have been posting even *more* stuff in the days since...

"Alex? I'm still waiting for an explanation. One that doesn't make me wonder if you've been replaced by an alien pod person."

Alex snorts at this, because she's been wondering about that herself, lately. "OK look, so the honest truth is that I have a...I don't know, a new hobby, I guess you could call it? One that I've been staying up nights lately learning about. And I just get so wrapped up in it that...well, I guess I haven't been sleeping properly."

(And wow, *that* sure didn't sound extremely nerdy and Justin-like at all. Guh. She just hopes he isn't hanging around the hall where he could have heard that, or something, because he'd never let her live it down. Christalmighty, but Future Harper and this stupid little fandom she's spawned have a lot to answer for, that's all she's gonna say.)

"A *hobby*. Really." Mister Laritate narrows his gaze at her, skepticism warring with hope in his eyes. "You mean an extra-curricular you could put on your college applications next year?"

Another snort escapes her before Alex can stop herself. "Not exactly, no."

"Pity," Mister Laritate says, clearly disappointed. Wiping his hands off on the rag, he glances over to the painting she'd been working on before she'd fallen asleep on it. "Well, whatever it is, I'm glad to see it's at least inspired you to move past your whole '*lonesome wolf howling forlornly at the moon*' phase."

"Yeah, well..." Alex shrugs uncomfortably and feels her cheeks begin to burn. OK, so maybe the first couple months after that horrible night in Transylvania had been kinda rough. And maybe she'd been a little preoccupied. And maybe there'd been a few (dozen) variations on the theme. Which might now be hidden in the basement at home, stuffed in the corner behind the ol' home gym, because maybe she's a little embarrassed by the whole thing now, even if it *had* been some of her best work so far. Big deal. Besides, getting fixated on an idea is what real artists *do*. If Picasso could have a Blue Period, then she's allowed to have had a Forlorn Wolf Period. Paint what you know, right?

(Uh, not that *this* particular piece is her painting what she knows, though. Or that it represents her *next* artistic period, or whatever. God, no. It's just...what was on her mind when she first picked up the brush, is all. On account of all the reading. Well, that and she was just plain sick of painting wolves all the damn time.)

"What are you calling it?" Mister Laritate asks, still admiring the piece. Alex flushes even deeper as she reaches up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear, uncharacteristically bashful. Because, even if he doesn't know it—it's not like anyone is wearing name tags or anything, after all—he's staring at quite possibly the most risqué thing she's ever allowed herself to paint. So, y'know, awkward.

"Uh, *Forbidden Flame*, I'm thinking?" Alex replies. She winces as she hears it out loud for the first time, and realizes how much better it sounded in her head. "I mean, I'm not sure yet. I know it's a little, y'know, cheesy and romance novelly, but—"

"No, it suits it," Mister Laritate cuts her off, nodding and reaching up to stroke his chin while gesturing towards the painting with his other hand. "I particularly like the way you've used all the negative space, how their outlines are just barely visible in the light of the campfire. You can practically see it flickering between them. And the way they're staring at each other over it, so close but separated...it really evokes an almost tangible sense of longing. Very moving. Gets you right here."

Mister Laritate presses his fist into the middle of his chest and grimaces, like she's given him heartburn or something. Alex looks from the painting to him and back again, surprised that he not only likes it, but actually appears to *get* it, on a level she's not sure even Link or Miss Majorhealy could.

"Uh..." She opens and closes her mouth a few times, reaching awkwardly for a response. "Thanks, I guess?"

Mister Laritate nods sharply, then claps a beefy hand on her shoulder. "Just spackle over this little forehead boo-boo you made in the middle with some orange paint, or something, and we'll toss it into the Art-Off, tomorrow. It'll be the buckingest bronco in the rodeo, guaranteed...unless, of course, Harper has another one of those adorable kitten paintings waiting in the bullpen, that is. I can't get enough of those things."

Alex deflates as the grin slides right off her face, and cocks an eyebrow at him. Then again...

"Swell," she says flatly.

"I thought you'd be excited," he says, patting her shoulder again before he turns to head out of class. "I'll see you later this afternoon, Russo. My office, three-fifteen sharp."

Alex pauses in the middle of shrugging out of her paint smock—an almost-new oxford button-down she lifted from Justin's room the same night she swiped his stupid Selena Gomez poster—and twists partway round to frown at him. "Huh? What for?"

"Detention, Miss Russo. Zero tolerance, remember?" he says as he opens the door out into the hall. But before he steps through, he pauses and turns to look back at her over his shoulder, one hand on the doorknob. "Alex?"

"Yeah? " Alex sighs impatiently, her back to him as she unfolds the sheet.

"This new 'hobby' of yours," he asks. "It isn't anything dangerous and/or illegal, is it?"

Alex lifts her head and frowns without turning around, not quite sure how to answer that. "Ummmm...not so far?"

"Hmph. I often wonder how your parents manage to sleep at night." Mister Laritate glances at the painting again, his eyes softening a little at the corners behind his glasses. "It really is a gorgeous piece, Alex. Easily your best, yet. Wherever it is you've found your inspiration, keep it up. Just be careful, all right?"

Alex blinks, and turns back around, but he's disappeared into the hallway before she can open her mouth to say anything. She smiles after him, delighted and flush with pride despite herself. And, somewhere, she imagines, RoYalFlush4 is peeing herself again.

Lifting the sheet to drape it over the easel, she takes another look at her painting. OK, so maybe it isn't *completely* ruined. The smear her forehead left is noticeable, certainly, but the shape of it is...interesting. Picking up a brush, she drags the tip over the still-damp paint, shaping it a little around the edges, gently carving out a subtle outline, until it's vaguely distinguishable as a rough, asymmetrical heart-shape, right in the center of the flame. She rolls her eyes at herself as she stands back to look at it, but shrugs and sets the brush down nevertheless.

Whatever. It's called *Forbidden Flame*, for Christ's sake. Not like this made it any girlier. At least now it's friggin' done and out of her system, right?

(Right?)

On a whim, Alex fishes her cell phone out of her pocket, then holds it out in front of her. Thumbing its camera on, she steps back until her painting fills the screen, then takes a picture. And though the resulting photo doesn't really do it justice, it's good enough that she shrugs again and emails it to herself.

(Not for any particular reason, really. Just 'cause. It's not like she has any intention of, say, sharing it with anybody, or anything. Nope. Not even.)

Nodding to herself, Alex pockets her phone, settles the sheet over the easel, then grabs her backpack and heads out of the room. She makes a point of heading in the exact opposite direction of Mrs. Thomas-Jayharper's class. Because, seriously, screw that. What's the point in not skipping if she already *has* detention? Might as well do something worthwhile to have earned it.

xiii.

Twenty minutes later, Alex is set up with her Macbook and a mocha frappacino at a table near the window in a Starbucks near

Washington Square Park, living the dream. And yeah, so all she's doing is using their wifi to read morally questionable fanfiction while she ditches sixth period, but still...she *looks* like she could be one of those trendy graphic design students, and that's all that matters, right? All she's really missing is the Wacom. (And given that two other girls in the shop, who apparently *are* genuine trendy graphic design students, are using drawing tablets with their own Macbooks—while a third is actually drawing directly on her laptop—it looks like Justin may actually have been right on that score. Dammit. She hates it when that happens.)

Sipping her drink, Alex boots up the Macbook and types in her password. ('davidhenrie', dammit, if only because what's good for the goose is good for the goddamn lady-goose, thankyouverymuch. Besides, she saw those pictures of him and Selena *Ho-mez* getting all cozy on the set of the *Charmed and Dangerous* movie, and dude? The boy is *fine*. Especially without his shirt on. Seriously, *unf!*) Then, starting up Safari, she scootches back in her chair, rests her elbow on the table and cradles her chin in her hand. After the front page of *julia_alan* takes a second or two to load, she scrolls down to the rec meme to check where she left off. And she's filled with an odd mix of emotions when she sees that more than half the links in the comments thread are dark, similar to those she feels when she's nearly done one of the books: accomplishment that she's come so far, combined with disappointment that it's almost over.

(Yeah, that's right: disappointment. That she's nearly done *reading*. About characters based on her and her brother doing the jiggy-jiggy. And that once she's exhausted the really good stories, she may have to content herself with the stuff that's merely average stuff from here on out. Christ, Laritate is right: she really *has* been replaced by a pod person, hasn't she? Or an *Edgebono Utoosis* clone gone horribly awry.)

Honestly, though? While at first she started out looking at this stuff strictly for the lulz, and the bizarre, train-wreck *wrongness* of it all (which, Alex being who she is, kind of appeals to her) she has to admit that she's genuinely enjoyed herself. Almost as much as she's enjoyed reading the books themselves. Even more so, in some cases. Yeah, Future Harper's books are *good*, and her writing's been getting better with each one, but they're also *safe*. Comfortable. Like slipping into a warm bath. The kinky thrill of the whole sibcestry subtext thing (and Justin's hilariously wigged-out reaction to it in his annotations) has definitely added a layer of...um, something she doesn't have a word to describe, exactly...but without it? The books would have all the danger and mystery of flipping through an old photo album, her freshman yearbook, or the menu of that sketchy little skeeball place Dean took her to all the time. She already knows how everything is going to turn out. That everyone's more or less gonna be fine. Because, duh, they've already *lived* through it all.

(Well, so far, anyway. There's a very good reason why Alex has lingered so long on the end of Book Six. Finishing that will more or less bring the story up to date, which means Book Seven will mostly deal with stuff that hasn't happened to her, yet. And while she knows that's what Justin finds most intriguing about it—he'd started reading and rereading the series back when Book Five was still news, after all—it honestly scares Alex a little. Because, what if that horrible night in Transylvania pales in comparison to something even *more* horrible that's waiting in Book Seven? And what if she's wrong about the whole '*Back to the Future*' thing, and she can't do anything to change it? After all, Future Harper had already known all that she and Mason were bound to break up, even though Alex hadn't even *met* him yet!)

And that's what makes the stories online so appealing. Not only are they written easily as well as the books they're based on—or, again, actually *better-written* in more than a few instances—but they're so much more exciting, because she has absolutely zero clue what's going to happen next. It's like every one is a little window into an alternate reality where anything and everything is possible, without restriction. And while it's still safe, because it's clearly make-believe, and more than a few of them are just plain ridiculous, it's utterly fascinating—and, sometimes, chilling—to see how these people who know Julia inside and out think she would react in these weird, wild situations they come up with.

What if the mortal world found out about the wizarding world? (Apparently, the two would either go to war, destroying half the country in the process, or the government would start hunting wizards down, packing them into internment camps that made Guantanamo Bay look like Disneyworld, forcing the Rubiks to run for their lives. So, y'know...either way, bad.) What if the parents of Alan's vampire girlfriend *had* eaten Julia and Hayley? (Short answer: Julia would survive, but she'd lose her tan and gain a sudden fondness for tight, black leather. And monster hunter Alan would feel duty-bound to take her down. Which, gah, he *would*, in more ways than one.) What if Julia hadn't been able to undo the wishes that made everybody forget who Alan was (and also invisible), or find the Crystal of Desire and bring him and Sam back after they'd disappeared? (And the angst in those two is so painfully thick that it makes the *Wizards vs Mortals* stories feel like musical comedy by comparison.) What if they lived in Toronto instead of New York? (Julia would inexplicably have to battle every one of Alan's weirdo ex-girlfriends one-on-one, and her life would be full of obscure video game references. But she'd also play bass in a wicked-awesome band, which was cool.)

What if Julia and Alan fell in love?

It's this last one that's naturally at center of it all. Everything else essentially just an excuse for the writer to force them to discover/confront/admit the naughty!bad feelings they've *always* harbored for one another, or whatever. (Which is always just accepted as a given. And, having read the books herself, she can't blame them.) Some of the stories will bend over backwards to make it OK, and skirt around the whole 'rhymes-with-finessed' thing—revealing that, OMG, one of 'em's adopted, or magically

transforming one or both of them into completely different people first, or something—but a surprising number of them go with it. Hell, a good portion of them actually *embrace* it. For every story that finds a way to explicitly de-relate them, there's a dozen that seem to revel in the fact that they revolve around a brother and sister wanting to jump one another.

And though she *knows* she should find that repulsive, or at least exceedingly *strange*, she's surprised to find that she actually kind of respects the choice. Because, really, when you come right down to it, 'siblings don't fall in love with one another' is just another rule. Granted, it's a pretty goddamned huge one—the motherfrickin' Godzilla of rules, actually—but even the huge ones have always been little more than just vague guidelines to her. Alex has spent her entire life coloring outside the lines, in defiance of everyone's insisting that she shouldn't. And in a weird way, she's begun to see these crazy perverts who ship her literary alter-ego with her brother as kindred spirits. Rebels, like herself.

And that's why it still boggles her mind to think that Justin is actually one of them—well, OK, it's one *more* reason—because Justin won't rebel unless he has permission first. He clings to rules like a security blanket. It practically breaks his brain every time he sees her put ketchup and mayo on the same sandwich, which he insists aren't supposed to go together. How does someone like *that* wind up shipping a brother-sister pairing? *Especially when it's him and his own sister?*

Maybe she's not the only one who's a defective clone, here. Because, dude, seriously.

There *would* be one really easy way to find out what the hell is going through that oddly-shaped head of his, actually. Alex grimaces as she scrolls back up through the rec meme, taking note of the few links that remain light-blue nestled among all the dark ones that she's already clicked. Each and every one of which lead to stories written by—surprise, surprise—Archimedes. Who, apparently, has written a whole *bunch* of Jalan stuff, and is really, really good at it, seeing as how more than a half-dozen of his stories keep popping up again and again. More than one person even comments that his are the best Jalan fics they've ever read, because he's so wonderful at keeping Julia and Alan in-character, and his interactions between them are so *true*...

OK look, it's probably entirely useless to click on them. They're likely all sitting on his stupid LiveJournal, which is still friend-locked, and the lousy dork hasn't accepted her friend request. So, no point in trying. Waste of time.

Totally.

Nodding to herself, Alex takes another sip of her frappacino and scrolls back down the page, clicking on a link to download a popular fanmix, instead. She scans over the track listing, and rolls her eyes when she notices that the last song is *Naturally*, by Selena Gomez and the Scene.

Christalmighty, she just *cannot* get away from that chick, can she?

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Author's Note: *This week's update is relatively short, but I promise next week's will be double-sized, if not larger. You ought to have a pretty good understanding of why once you've reached the end. (Let's just say for now that next week will be a turning point, and leave it at that.)*

Also, while I'm here: thank you so much for all your reviews, favorites and alerts. It's been overwhelming to see how much love and attention OTP has received, given how oddly meta it is. I'm not the kind of writer who lives or dies by reviews, but your very kind feedback has definitely inspired me to power through some rough spots and uphill battles. (You know, those times when you're staring at the screen, struggling to remember what the hell you were hoping to accomplish with this scene, again? Yeah, there's been a few of those.) I can't possibly thank you enough.

As a humble token of my appreciation, please enjoy the blatant fan service that follows. ;)

*Much love to all and sundry,
SvM*

xiv.

It's just after three in the morning when, two nights later, Alex finally closes the back cover of Book Five. And even though it ends with he status quo happily restored, smiles and hugs all around, she still finds herself standing in the hallway, sniffing and wiping off her face, as she taps softly on the door to Justin's bedroom. He's always been a light sleeper, so it only takes a moment before he pulls it open partway and pokes his head out, frowning at her sleepily below his sleep-tousled hair.

"Alex...?"

She isn't crying. She is *not* crying. She *never* cries in front of anyone, least of all Justin. But the look of concern that fills his grey-green eyes tells her he understands that she so desperately *wants* to.

"Book Six?" he asks softly. "Transylvania?"

Alex shakes her head. "Puerto Rico."

He blinks at this, as though this surprises him, but then he simply nods, pulls the door open the rest of the way, and holds out his arms to her. She lets out the breath she didn't realize she was holding and steps towards him, allowing him to envelop her in a tight hug as she lowers her chin and presses her forehead into the warmth of his bare chest.

(Wow, when did Justin start sleeping without a shirt on? And when did his chest get so...positively David Henrie-ish?)

"You know, I *wondered* why you hadn't snuck in to put them back, yet," Justin says quietly, his voice just above a whisper. "At the rate you were stealing them before, I thought you would've been done weeks ago."

"I've been busy," Alex sniffles, without raising her head. "Besides, what makes you think you're getting them back? You *gave* them to me, remember?"

"I *lent* them to you, Alex. There is a difference."

"Whatever, egghead. They're totally going in the box."

Justin's chest rises and falls as he heaves an exasperated sigh, and she feels him shake his head softly above her. And something about it makes her tighten her arms around his ribs, as though she's holding on to him for dear life.

"Oof," he grunts in response. "Alex, what—?"

"I thought I'd lost you forever, she murmurs into his chest, her voice thick with the not-tears that she is absolutely *not* crying. "I mean, Max too, obviously, but...I thought I'd never get to tease you or taunt you or make you completely crazy ever again. And then in the book...what you wrote in your little notes about how awful it felt when you realized you'd lost the competition...and then you couldn't remember me, and that *thing* picked you up and took you away, and—"

"Shhh," he says, squeezing her tightly, cutting her off mid-rant. And she's glad he does, because it's weird talking about the books and his notes and everything out loud, after *not* talking about it for so long. He strokes one thumb up and down the skin of her

upper arm, just below the sleeve of her t-shirt. "I'm here, now. You got us back. I'm not going anywhere."

She doesn't say anything, just concentrates on breathing, because that helps with the whole not crying thing. Just the scent of him soothes and relaxes her in a way she can't explain. Eyes closed, she turns her head and nestles her cheek against his chest, listening to the subtle double-thump of his heartbeat. He chuckles softly, then reaches up and brushes her dark hair away from her face.

"Do you wanna stay?" he asks gently.

Alex hesitates a moment, before she pulls back from him, raises her eyes to his, then nods ever so slightly.

"OK," he smiles, then reaches behind him to take her hand in his, and leads her back into his darkened bedroom. And it's with a strange mix of emotions that she follows him inside. It's like she's a little kid again, taking refuge with him from a scary thunderstorm, or the monster that lived under her bed. (Literally, as it turned out. You'd think she would've learned not to leave the portal door hanging open again, after that whole little episode, but you'd be wrong.) But at the same time, she feels an illicit little thrill run through her, and she's never been so keenly aware that she's *not* a little kid, anymore...or that, Captain Jim Bob Sherwood night notwithstanding, neither is Justin.

(Just one glimpse at his chest is enough to confirm that. And as much as she tries, she cannot keep her eyes off it. Because, seriously...in the immortal words of Dot Warner: "*Helloooooo, nurse!*")

Climbing up into his bed, she scampers over to what she's always thought of being *her* side, then slips her bare feet under the covers and gathers them around herself. Justin smiles at her fondly as he sits down on the edge opposite her, and starts fiddling with the digital clock radio on his nightstand.

"I'm, uh, gonna set the alarm for eight-thirty here, OK?" he says over his shoulder, by way of explanation. Then, off her look of *'Are you freakin' kidding me?'*: "Yes, I know it's Saturday, and you think getting up before noon on the weekend is something that happens to other people, but it's probably best that you were back in your own bed before Mom and Dad—"

"Yeah, not the first secret boy-girl sleepover I've ever had, egghead. I know the drill, thanks."

Justin pauses in the middle of setting the alarm, and twists around to stare at her with one eyebrow raised. Alex flushes darkly, and burrows down deeper into his blankets.

"Uh, not that we're...y'know...I didn't mean..."

"Let's make it eight o'clock, just to be safe," Justin says decisively, cutting her off. Nodding to himself, he swings his legs up onto the bed and settles back next to her. They spend the next few moments engaged in a silent tug-of-war for the blankets, before she finally relents and lets him share. Because she's charitable like that, not because he's stronger than her, or anything.

Exhaling sharply in triumph, Justin turns on his side towards her. After a moment's indecision, he awkwardly drapes one arm over her, obviously taking care not to brush anything...problematic. (And she can't help but run her eyes over the surprisingly well-defined curve of his bicep as he does. For the first time she notices how positively David Henrie-ish his arms are, too.)

They grin goofily at each other for a moment, embarrassed and amused by their mutual awkwardness, before Justin yawns and closes his eyes. "Good night, Alex."

Alex blinks and frowns at him for a moment. What, that's it? Seriously?

"Hey, waitasec," she says, nudging him with her elbow before he can fall asleep. "You really think that Dad put us through an old version of the wizard competition? That it might not have even counted, since it doesn't work that way anymore? That's what you said in your notes."

"Mmm-hmm," Justin nods, without opening his eyes. "Dad was the one who cast the spell, right? So I think we did it the way he, Uncle Kelbo and Aunt Megan did when they were kids. But I'm pretty sure that's obsolete now."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, that was over twenty years ago, for one thing. People didn't even have cell phones or the internet, back then. Everything changes with time. Now they use the power transfer chamber, and you get a cool hat, and..." He trails off as he yawns again. "I dunno. It's funny, there's been all kinds of speculation online that Book Five actually takes place in an alternate universe, or something, since nothing that happens in it even gets referenced in Book Six, and there's so many discrepancies that don't add up...but we both know that isn't the case."

"How is Book Six, by the way?" Alex asks. "I heard it's not as good. I keep seeing people trash it online. Saying it's jumped the shark, or whatever."

Justin's arm shifts against her midriff as he shrugs. "It's different. Alan and Julia aren't as close in that one, which I think is why people don't like it as much, especially after Book Five. They still have their moments, but they're more...rivals, I guess? They spend more time working against each other than with each other. Which to me makes sense, given how the competition turned out, but still...it's a departure."

Alex's frown deepens at this. "But Book Six is the first one that's set in the future, right?"

"Well, the future to us, anyway," Justin replies, eyes still closed. "It's all still the past to Future Harper, remember. But yeah, mostly. We've caught up a bit, obviously, but the second half is all about stuff that hasn't happened to us yet."

"So does that mean...you and me aren't going to be as close?" Alex asks in a small voice. "Are we destined just to be, like, rivals or whatever? Like Dad and Aunt Megan?"

This finally makes Justin open his eyes. His brow furrows over them in concern. "Hey, how many times do I have to tell you that you're not going to wind up like Aunt Megan? Besides, I thought you didn't put any stock into the whole destiny thing. *Back to the Future*, remember?"

"I don't," Alex says hesitantly. Suddenly feeling vulnerable under the intensity of his gaze, Alex tears her eyes away from his, and stares up at the ceiling. "I just...I don't want to lose you again. I don't want what we have to change. I *like* what we are now."

Justin is quiet for a long moment, the only sound between them the steady rhythm of his breathing. But just as Alex begins to wonder if maybe he's fallen asleep, he surprises her by reaching over and brushing a stray lock of curly dark hair away from her forehead.

"Everything changes with time, Alex," he repeats. "One way or the other. But I meant what I said after the competition: no matter what happens, you won't lose me, OK?"

Alex turns her head to smile at him, and nods. "OK."

"Good," he nods back. "Now go to sleep, would you please? Eight o'clock is going to come a *whole* lot earlier than either of us would like..."

"Wait, hold the phone," Alex frowns, nudging him with her elbow again before he can close his eyes. "What about you? Why is it always me asking *you* not to leave *me*? Don't you ever worry about me bailing on you?"

Justin snorts. "What, are you kidding? You haven't left me alone for more than five minutes since you were three."

Alex narrows her eyes, silently glaring daggers at him, until Justin rolls his own eyes and relents.

"Yes, Alex, I worry sometimes," he admits with a sigh. "Mason has...worried me."

"*Pfft!* Well, *that* ship's clearly had the ever-loving crap sunk out of it," Alex scoffs, "so I'd say you're in the clear there."

"Mmm," Justin murmurs noncommittally as he closes his eyelids. "Look, seriously, Alex...good night, OK? I mean it."

"Ugh, fine," Alex grunts begrudgingly. "G'night."

Settling back into her pillow, Alex tugs the blankets towards her a few crucial inches, then lolls her head to the side until her face is so close to his that they're practically sharing the same breath. She smiles at him, then finally lets her eyes slide closed, the grin still plastered on her features as a comfortable silence settles between them.

It stays comfortable for all of about thirty seconds. Which, to be fair, is kind of a record for her.

"Psst, Justin...?" she stage-whispers, as she nudges him with her elbow again.

"I swear to God, not five minutes since you were three," he groans, exasperated. "What now?"

"I can't sleep. Tell me a story?"

"Well, maybe if you actually *tried* for more than thirty seconds, Alex, you'd—" He breaks off mid-rant and raises his head off the pillow to stare at her. "Wait, what?"

"You know, like when we were kids," Alex explains. "And you'd read to me when I was sick, or I couldn't sleep. Tell me a story."

Justin blinks at her, confusion plainly swirling in his eyes, shining in the subtle glow of his night light. "What, you mean like *The Cat in the Hat*? Because I think that one's been in your box ever since—"

"No, you idiot," she cuts him off, mimicking the overly-patient, 'my sister is an idiot' tone he uses on her, sometimes. "Not Dr. Seuss. *Something else*."

"Something—?" He frowns at her and shakes his head slightly, clearly not understanding. And Alex rolls her eyes and props herself up on her elbows to glance pointedly at his desk across the room, on the corner of which rests his laptop. Justin turns his head to follow her gaze, and actually does a double-take before he looks back at her, understanding finally dawning across his features. "Oh!"

"Oh!" she repeats, mocking him, shaking her head as she lays back down. Jesus, she'll never understand why everyone thinks *he's* the smart one.

Justin lifts the covers off himself, neatly folding one corner to the side as he slips out of bed and crosses the room in three paces to retrieve the computer. And by the time he turns back around, Alex has completely wrapped them around herself, and also stolen his pillow for good measure. She grins at him from within her cocoon as he heaves a sigh of resignation and sits down on the (bare) edge of his side of the bed, propping his laptop open across his thighs. She watches as he boots it up and pecks at a few keys, the light from the screen casting odd shadows across his features. And it's just like she's four again, and he's holding a flashlight in one hand and *Horton Hears A Who* in the other. Justin licks his lips, as though he's nervous, and his eyes flick from the screen, to her, and back.

"This is, um...well, you asked if I ever, uh...so...it's about how we...I mean how *I*...er..."

Alex cocks an eyebrow at him, and Justin trails off without completing the thought. Instead, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he clears his throat twice—the way he always does, always has—and begins.

"*Fortress of Solitude*," he announces. "By, um, Archimedes..."

Alex smiles a little at that, but lifts the edge of the blanket to her nose to hide her mouth, and says nothing.

"*Alan Rubik was seven years old, and his little sister Julia very nearly six,*" Justin continues to read, "*when their father sat him down to break the surprising news to him: Alan, it seemed, was a wizard...*"

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

xv.

Late the next morning, perched on the counter with her legs dangling, chin propped in her hand, Alex yawns for what seems like the bazillionth time. She watches blearily as Harper darts to and fro around the Sub Station, getting it ready for the Saturday lunch rush. Every so often, Alex reaches up to point at one of the tables, causing Harper to scurry towards it, balancing a serving tray full of supplies in one hand.

"OK, OK, I think that's enough napkins for Table Four," Alex calls to her, covering her mouth with the back of her hand to mask another yawn. "Ooo, but look, Harper: Table Five is out of pepper, and Table Six is missing the sugar dispenser."

"That's because you've been eating sugar out of it all morning," Harper grunts, shooting her a dirty look as she sets Table Four's napkin holder back down, and hurries over to Table Five.

Alex blinks, then looks down at the counter next to her, where her nearly-empty sugar dispenser sits next to her, plainly labeled with a '6' on the silver lid.

"And so I have," Alex nods. Picking it up, she up-ends it over her other hand, pouring a sizable mound of raw sugar into her palm. Harper winces a little as she watches Alex proceed to lick her palm clean, then hold out the glass canister towards her.

"I'm out," Alex says, jiggling it for emphasis. "Top me up?"

"Give me that!" Harper snaps. Dragging her tray of supplies over to the counter, she yanks the sugar dispenser out of her friend's hand. "Alex, we open in ten minutes. This is your shift too, you know. I could really use your help, here."

"But I am helping! I'm...uh...making sure everything is neat and orderly up here," Alex yawns. She turns to her right, reaches up and lackadaisically pushes a stack of menus a quarter inch closer to the cash register. "See? Those were totally out of place. Woulda thrown the whole operation outta whack..."

"Uh-huh," Harper says flatly. She narrows her eyes at Alex as she sets the tray on the counter next to her, and begins unscrewing the top of the sugar dispenser for Table Six. "So what were *you* doing last night?"

"Huh?" Startled by the question, Alex sits up straight, eying the redhead warily. "Harper, you *know* what I did last night. You dragged me to see that stupid Ruby Donahue chick flick, remember? And the usher nearly kicked us out because I kept laughing the whole time that even the midget from *Halloween Sorority Party Disaster* couldn't do a better job of killing her career?"

"I mean after that," Harper says, smirking down at the sugar dispenser as she refills it. "What'd you do after we got home?"

Alex feels her cheeks begin to burn, but shrugs with faux-nonchalance. "Nothing, just went to bed. Why?"

"I see," Harper nods without looking up, her smirk blossoming into a full-on grin as she screws the silver lid back onto the canister. "And who did you take to bed *with* you?"

"*Harper—!*" Gasping in shock and alarm, Alex casts a quick glance at the black spiral staircase that leads up into the loft, then hops down off the counter, slaps a hand over Harper's mouth and leans into her, pushing the giggling redhead ahead of her clear across the diner.

"Jesus, Harper! What the hell?" Alex hisses at her, once they're safely in the subway car on the other side. "Are you *trying* to get me grounded?"

"I dunno, Alex," Harper says, in a sing-song voice. "Have you done something you could possibly get grounded *for*?"

"Pfft, I've *always* done something I could possibly get grounded for," Alex snaps, waving one hand dismissively. "Look, what gives? How are you suddenly able to read my mind? Have you been using Max's stupid macaroni tube, or something?"

"Macaroni—?" Harper blinks, then shakes her head and breaks back into a wide smile. "Wait, so I guessed right, then. There *is* a new boy in the picture."

"What? No!" Alex protests, and cringes inwardly at how unconvincing it sounds, even to her ears. "I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Oh, please," Harper scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "Save it for somebody who *hasn't* been your best friend since

kindergarten. The bloodshot eyes? The bags *under* them? The messy *'I'm too tired to give a fig what I look like'* ponytail? The way you've been smiling to yourself every time you think I'm not looking? I can recognize all the signs when I see them, Alex. It's Mason all over again."

The bottom drops out of Alex's stomach as she shakes her head from side to side. "Harper, no...you've got it all wrong...I swear, it's not what you think..."

"Oh, come off it!" Harper laughs, putting her hands on her hips. "Are you *seriously* going to stand there and tell me you *weren't* up half the night texting with some guy?"

Alex feels her jaw drop, completely of its own accord. Wait, *that's* what she thinks is going on?

"Ummmm...no?" she says hesitantly.

"Darn straight, you're not!" Harper beams. "All right, spill! Who is it? It better not be Jeremy from Science, 'cause then I'd have to hurt you..."

Alex opens her mouth slowly, her mind racing to come up with a name that sounds halfway believable...but before she can answer, the sound of the freezer door being pushed open from the inside drags both their attention back to the other side of the diner.

"...couldn't happen anyway, dude," Zeke says as he backs into the kitchen, his arms laden with two cardboard trays of tomatoes. He presses his lower back into the door's push-bar, swinging it open and holding it for Justin.

"What are you talking about? Of *course* it could happen!" Justin grunts, shuffling stiffly past Zeke with a white plastic pail of sliced olives dangling from each hand. "Hello? What about Genetic Sexual Attraction?"

"That only works for siblings who were raised separately and met as adults, duh!" Zeke says, rolling his eyes as if this should be the most obvious thing in the world. "Which explains why Luke and Leia could be all hot for each other, by the way. But Julia and Alan? Raised. Together. Since. Birth. And a little thing called the Westermarck Effect says that *any* two people who live in close domestic proximity, during the first few years in the life of either one, are both desensitized to later close sexual attraction."

"Oh?" Justin frowns, setting the pails of olives on the floor in front of the prep station. "Hang on, but Freud says—"

"Don't give me Freud! Westermarck out-Freuds Freud! Face it, it couldn't happen, even if his sister was as hot as Selena Gomez!" Zeke lays the tomato trays down on the counter, then turns and pokes Justin sharply in the chest. "BAM! You've just been SCIENCED!"

"Ow," Justin winces, flinching away. "OK, but what if his sister is actually *hotter* than Selena Gomez?"

"What on Earth are you two talking about?" Harper calls across the diner with a frown, causing the two boys to jump in surprise.

Justin blanches as he stares at them through the pass-through, his eyes darting from Alex to Harper, and back again "Uh..."

"Zeke, why are you even here? We're not open yet!" Harper asks, leaving Alex's side and heading back towards the kitchen. Alex waits until she's sure Justin is focussed on Harper again, then—conscious of what Harper said about her *'don't give a fig what I look like'* pony tail—quickly reaches back and yanks her hair free from the scrunchie, then shakes it out a little before following along behind.

(Y'know, only so Zeke doesn't think she's a slob. Because Zeke Beekerman's opinion means oh-so-very-much to her. Shyeah.)

"Oh, Justin called this morning and asked me to come over and help him set up, on account of his injury," Zeke replies.

"Injury?" Harper asks, grimacing at Justin in concern. "What injury? Are you OK, Justin?"

"Fine, fine," Justin says, raising both hands and patting the air between them. "It's nothing, really. I just twisted my ankle getting out of bed this morning, is all. It's not bad, but I'm moving a lot slower than normal, and I can't exactly carry much."

"How the heck did you manage to twist your ankle getting out of bed?" Harper says, incredulous.

"Uh, it's more like I *fell* out of bed, actually. Almost as if I'd been shoved." And here Justin glares at the uncharacteristically silent Alex. "It's kind of a long story."

Alex flushes darkly as she glances away. Look, the stupid alarm went off a mere hour and a half after she'd finally fallen asleep,

OK? She doesn't exactly do well with being woken up suddenly on a Saturday morning, even in the best of circumstances. She shouldn't be held responsible for what she does when she's semi-conscious. And who the hell told him to sleep so close to her, anyway? He's known her for almost eighteen years, he should damn well know better by now. Besides, you read a girl a bedtime story that goes on for twenty-thousand words and keep her up half the night in the process, you deserve whatever's coming to you, as far as she's concerned. Especially when she *still* didn't get to hear the end.

Not that she doesn't already *know* how it ends—duh, she lived through it, after all—but that's entirely beside the point. Even though she'd been intimately familiar with the story, she'd still hung on Justin's every word as he'd read it to her. Because while she remembered everything about when Justin had first come into his magic—the deep suspicion he was hiding something from her, the unexpected sting of betrayal when he refused to tell her what it was, and the desperate ploy to get back at him and make him jealous by starting to hang out with Harper—she'd never heard the story told from *his* perspective before. Or even really *considered* his perspective, to be honest, if only because she assumed it'd be typically *Justin*: boring, self-righteous, and altogether dork-tastic.

Surprisingly, though, it wasn't. If anything, it was exactly the opposite of what she'd expected: funny, sweet, self-deprecating...and almost entirely focused on her. Sure, Julia hadn't actually been in the story all that much—a fact which had initially annoyed her to no end—but somehow it still managed to revolve around her by the mere fact of her absence. Alex had always just assumed that the day Justin's powers had come in must have been the best of his up-till-then completely unremarkable life. (Hell, the day Alex's powers had finally popped up was certainly the best day of *her* life, stupid hat notwithstanding.) She'd never guessed that he'd actually agonized over it, the way it threatened to drive a wedge between them, and how much he hated that he couldn't tell her why.

And maybe that broke her heart, just a little. Especially the way his voice had cracked, and gone all raw and throaty, every time it came up in the story how miserable and alone he'd felt without her. For the very first time, she found herself...well, certainly not *agreeing* with, but at least kinda sorta seeing the point of...that small vocal minority within the C&D fandom who didn't want to see Julia and Alan together. Not because they objected to the incest, mind you—that was an even smaller minority, believe it or not—but simply because Julia could be such an outright hateful bitch towards him, sometimes. (OK, *most* of the time.) Even Alex found herself hating on Julia a little bit by the time the Funky Hat song was introduced, and had been surprised to find her cheeks burning with embarrassment as she'd pulled Justin's blanket up over her head to hide it. (Look, she was *five* at the time, all right?)

Which was about when the lateness of the hour, the cozy warmth of the Justin-scented blanket, and the comforting drone of his voice had conspired together to knock her out faster than Max's stupid five-foot teleportation stick. She fought the overwhelming heaviness in her eyelids as long as she could, eager to hear the part where Justin had rescued her from Gigi—er, Alan had rescued Julia from Fifi—and finally been forced to come clean with her about magic, but it was a lost cause. The next thing she knew, his alarm was going off, and he was screeching in her ear as she kicked him off the bed before she was even really aware she was doing it.

Twenty thousand freakin' words. And she *still* didn't get to hear the end. He was lucky she hadn't broken his neck outright. No jury in the land would convict her.

Which brings her back to, well, now: dead on her feet, looking like shit, oddly annoyed, and sharing an increasingly uncomfortable moment with the boy in whose bed she spent the night, who also happens to be her big brother. So of course she falls back to the same safe and familiar territory she always does whenever she's feeling uncomfortable or unsure of herself, especially around him: cue the hateful bitch.

"Snkt," she snorts, cocking an eyebrow and looking at him as though he'd grown a second head. "You hurt yourself waking up? Seriously? Could you possibly *be* any lamer, penis-breath?"

"*Penis-breath*?" Zeke and Harper repeat in the same instant, Zeke aghast, Harper amused. Justin, for his part, just smiles ever so slightly, his grey-green eyes dancing as he looks at her, in a way that makes the tips of Alex' ears feel hot.

"What?" she snorts, her eyes flicking between Harper and Zeke, if only to have somewhere else to look. "It's not the worst thing I've ever called him. Trust me, I've said a lot worse."

"Worse than *that*?" Zeke asks, sounding horrified.

"Yeah, but what are you, eight?" Harper chuckles. "I don't think I've heard you call Justin that since we were—"

"In kindergarten," Justin says, wincing a little as he limps towards her a step, and crosses his David Henrie-ish arms over his David Henrie-ish chest. "Right after you two started hanging out. About the same time you made up the Funky Hat Song to make fun of me, remember?"

"Oh, that's *right*!" Harper grins and snaps her fingers in remembrance. "Because your dad made you wear that...oh, that *awful*

floppy hat to contain your mag—"

"Harper," Alex says sharply, jabbing her friend in the ribs and jerking her head towards a very bewildered-looking Zeke.

"—I mean for absolutely no good reason whatsoever!" Harper finishes smoothly, with a wistful sigh. "Memories, huh? Wow. What made you think of that, Alex?"

Alex blinks at her, her ears burning even hotter as she feels more than sees Justin smirking at her silently, one eyebrow raised ever so smugly.

"Nothing," she says, without looking at him. "Penis-breath is just a classic. I'm bringing it back. Now if you'll excuse me, we open in less than five minutes, and these tables are not going to get ready themselves. So I'll just be over here...figuring out exactly how we do that."

Nodding to her, Alex scoops a bar towel up off the counter as she passes it, and heads for the subway car on the other side, wincing and pretending not to hear the rest of them talk about her as she walks away.

"Uh, what's up with her?" Zeke asks under his breath. "I don't think I ever seen Alex even *pretend* to do work before."

"I'm not entirely sure," Harper replies, her voice taking on a sing-song quality, "but I *think* there may be a new boy in the offing..."

"Really?" Justin asks, sounding intrigued.

"*What?* You mean Alex is gonna *kill* some dude?"

"She said 'boy in the offing', Zeke," Justin says flatly. "Not 'offing a boy'..."

"Oh, right. Sorry J-Man, your family just kind of weirds me out a little. Calling you awful names, making you wear strange clothes, then making up songs to mock you about them...and those are the *good* memories? I'm sure glad *I* don't have to live here!"

"Eh," Harper says, with a shrug in her voice. "You get used to it."

Author's Note: And we're back! After a not-so-brief hiatus which included a few spin-offs (more about those in a sec) a lengthy struggle with writer's block, a somewhat lackluster start to the fourth season of *Wizards*, and a completely unforeseen change in my relationship status (from 'Single' to 'It's Complicated' to 'In A Committed Relationship' :P), OTP has returned with a vengeance!

Many, many thanks to everyone who kept the home fires burning in my absence, continuing to review, favorite and put both me and the story on your alerts lists, even though I'm sure it looked like I'd completely abandoned ship. My sincere apologies for not updating sooner.

(In fact, you all have my lovely and talented beta, Not Just A Nerd, to thank for me updating as soon as I did. Not only did she kick my butt to actually *do* something with the half-written chapter I'd had sitting on my hard drive for months, but she prodded me to update right away, instead of waiting until I'd worked ahead a few chapters like I wanted. This is actually only the first half of my intended comeback chapter, but she *insisted* I post what I had, upon pain of...well, the frowning of a lifetime, I guess. Seriously, you guys: she can frown like nobody's business!)

A word of warning, though: updates to OTP won't be quite as regular as they were before the hiatus, as I'm quite a bit busier now, but there *will* be updates. They'll probably also be a bit shorter than the pre-hiatus chapters—likely one scene per chapter instead of two—in order to allow me to get them out to you more quickly.

If you're looking for more Jalan-y goodness to tide you over in the meantime, there's three tie-ins to OTP that you should definitely check out, because they are awesome:

Fortress of Solitude by o0O-Archimedes-O0o is the very fic referenced in this chapter, the story of how eight year-old Alan Rubik found out he was a wizard, and what happens when he's forced to keep it a secret from his six year-old sister Julia. (Make sure you check out the reviews for this one, too—there's a lot of really super-goodness happening there, too! XD)

Firelight and Fidelity, also by o0O-Archimedes-O0o, is a short drabble about what *really* happened between Alan and Julia that night in the jungle, after the infamous 'campfire scene' in Book 5 of *Charmed & Dangerous*.

And finally, *Horizontal Dancing on the Ceiling* by jlnpedia, is a hot and hilarious M-rated story about Alan and Julia spending an eventful weekend alone together, set in his *Julia Gets Spanked* AU.

Hope you enjoy them! Until next time...

SvM

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

xvi.

A considerable amount of time later, Alex wakes up for the *second* time that day.

She blinks in surprise as she finds herself alone, lying in her bed, under blankets that smell like Justin - the ones she was still wrapped in this morning when he flashed her back to her room, before she could do any more damage to him. Her iPod, sitting in its dock on her nightstand, tells her it's a little after four pm. She frowns at it a moment, then shrugs one shoulder and sits up, yawning and stretching before she drapes the covers around her like a shawl.

Not that she minds, but why isn't she downstairs at work? And how the hell did she get *here*?

Let's see...the last thing she remembers, the Sub Station was on the verge of opening for the day, Justin had just told Zeke that he thought she was hotter than Selena Gomez—OK, not in so many words, but that's clearly what he'd meant to say—and Harper had just revealed to both of them that she thought Alex had a new boy in her life. All of which happened the morning *after* Alex had spent the night in Justin's room, in Justin's *bed*, bonding over him reading to her a vaguely incestuous piece of fan fiction for a book series that Harper is destined to write about them in the future.

So, yeah, awkward.

Awkward enough that she'd actually fled the conversation to do *work* instead, a fact which astounds even her. And then she'd sat down at Table 9—good old, comfy Table 9—with the intention of wiping it down, or buffing it up, or whatever the hell it was you were supposed to do to tables right before the Sub Station opened. And OK, so then maybe she'd put her head down, and maybe she'd closed her eyes a little, just to rest them, just for a second or two...

"Oh, Table 9," she yawns fondly, reaching up to scratch an itch in her side. "I never *could* resist you..."

Clearly, in his desperation to be rid of her before their parents came down, and explanations would have to be made as to *why* Alex was asleep on the job, Justin must have either carried her back here, or simply used magic without permission and flashed her back again. And while she's not entirely sure why he wouldn't have just yelled at her to wake up and get her sleepy ass back to work, already—y'know, the way he *normally* did when she fell asleep during their shift—either way, she's chalking it up as a win. Because he would have hated doing either, and she'd made him do it. And apparently managed to keep his blankets in the process. Which, by the way, she is so totally not giving back.

"Well, I guess that's one way to avoid having to talk to him about our *feelings* all day," she says, then looks up at her reflection in the full-length mirror that stands next to her dresser, and gives herself a double thumbs-up. "Good work, Alex."

Sitting on the edge of her bed, legs dangling, Alex yawns again, then gathers the blankets around herself. She sleepily props her chin in her hand, considering the rest of the day spread out before her—OK, evening, whatever—and inwardly debating about what to do with it. (Yeah, yeah...so technically she still has an hour left in her shift at the Sub Station, but *screw that!* Justin's clearly OK with the idea of giving her a pass on the day, and she's not about to look a gift dork in the mouth, or whatever.)

Her options, as it turns out, are actually pretty limited. As much as she'd love to head down to the tunnel, put on her iPod and throw paint at a wall until it's past curfew, the end of January is sadly a little too nippy for that. Harper's already made plans for the night, to go make moon-eyes at Zeke while he competes in some bullshit clog dancing thing in Brooklyn Heights, so hanging with her is *oh so clearly* off the agenda. And judging from the muffled explosions, gunfire, and steady stream of trash-talk filtering through her door, Max is either pwning n00bs on Xbox Live, or staging a particularly foul-mouthed military coup from the living room. Which means camping out on the couch for a *Jersey Shore* marathon is out.

Hmm. Well, there *is* always homework...

"Snkt!" she chuckles to the empty room, then sighs and looks at herself fondly in the mirror. "Oh Alex, you *slay* me!"

Still shaking her head and chuckling at her own joke, Alex's eyes drift across the room to her vanity, where—nestled amongst the clutter of make-up, candles and feathers—Book 6 of *Charmed and Dangerous* and her Macbook sit side-by-side, as if competing for her attention. She glances at herself in the mirror again, pursing her lips as she considers. On the one hand, she's still not sure she's ready for what's waiting for her in Book 6. And it's not just the future stuff she's talking about either, but the stuff she'd have to get through to *get* to the future stuff. Because the absolute *last* thing she needs right now is a relapse into her whole dopey 'Forlorn Wolf Howling at the Moon' phase. On the other, hand, though...

Twenty thousand words. And she *still* didn't get to hear the end.

...but, for some reason, she finds she really, really *wants* to.

Alex's eyes flick to meet her reflection's in the mirror, before she turns her head and gazes at the door, hesitating without really knowing *why*. Because it's not like she hasn't read C&D fic in here before, including some really dirty stuff. Hell, she'd read most of *Julia Gets Spanked* in broad daylight, with her bedroom door wide open, and hadn't thought twice about getting caught. And Justin's cutesy little "Baby Jalan" fic? It doesn't even come close to approaching *that* level of...um...

"Depravity," she says out loud, coloring a little as she looks up at her reflection. "What? Don't give me that look. I was totally gonna say depravity. Not to mention *backwards*. Alan's the Dom and Julia's the sub? Pfft, as if. It'd totally be the other way 'round in real—"

Alex breaks off, and flushes even deeper as she tears her eyes away from the mirror. Shyeah, so not finishing that sentence...

Still, though, there's something about Justin's wholesome little-kid story—so squeaky-clean that it barely even *qualifies* as a proper Jalan fic—and the idea of being *caught* with it, that makes her reach for her wand. Pointing it at her bedroom door, she casts not just one, not two, but *three* separate wards against intrusion. Including one versus scrying, if only because Max has lately developed a habit of using *Duranium Duranium* to peek into places he's not supposed to go, like the girls' locker room at Tribeca Prep...

Satisfied, she sets her wand back down on the nightstand, then fetches her Macbook off the vanity and settles back down onto the bed. Popping the computer open, she taps the space bar to wake it up, opens up Safari and pulls up the rec list from *julia_alan* she has bookmarked. She scrolls about a third of the way down, navigating towards one of the few light blue links left in the comments...

"This isn't gonna work, y'know," she says out loud to the mirror, even as she clicks on it. "I guarantee you the dork still has all his posts friend-locked—"

She breaks off in mid-sentence as '*Fortress of Solitude, a Charmed & Dangerous story*' loads itself into the browser.

Well, hey. *That* was unexpected.

"Wait, what the frig is Fanfiction dot net?" she asks, looking up from the title on the top of the screen to frown at her reflection. "So what, LiveJournal wasn't enough? There's a whole *site* devoted to this crap, now? Ugh, I swear the internet is run by nerds..."

Here, it appears, Justin goes by the even *more* ridiculous name of 'o0O-Archimedes-O0o'—probably, she assumes, for the same reason she's not currently 'SelenaGmzSux' on LiveJournal, although she can't imagine a handle as geeky as 'Archimedes' being so hotly-contested—and that he's the author of only 2 stories. Which puzzles her, because she's pretty sure he's written way more than that. There's at least a half-dozen links attributed to him in the *julia_alan* rec thread alone.

So, um, what gives? Confused, she clicks on his name, linked in the story's header, which will presumably lead her to his profile...

'This is an account I've created strictly for cross-posting Charmed and Dangerous

fic I've written for the julia_alan community and the omgjuliaalan kink meme on Livejournal, in hopes of reaching a wider audience,' the first line of it reads.

"Uh huh," she says flatly. An audience of *one*, maybe. Because, while he explains his ulterior motive for only posting *some* of his stories here is to pique the curiosity of Jalan shippers from , and lure them back to check out his community on Livejournal, Alex knows what he's *really* up to: tightly controlling what *she* can and can't read. She's not sure whether he's doing it to protect her or himself—because, hi, she knows what a kink meme is now, and ew!—but it pisses her off either way. Just who does he think he is, anyway? This is just like when he tried to keep magic secret from her all over again!

'I've turned anon reviews on for the convenience of lurkers, and/or those who don't necessarily want their username linked to an incest pairing for a YA book series and/or a Disney movie,' his profile goes on to say. *'While I generally don't reply to reviews, I do read each and every one I receive, and appreciate them very much, even the negative ones. (Sometimes especially the negative ones!).'*

"Ohhhhh, really? Then I'll *give* you some reviews to appreciate, you domineering dillhole," she fumes, dragging her finger across the trackpad. "But trust me, you'll *know* who's leaving them."

Scrolling down, she clicks on the title for *Fortress of Solitude* and furiously begins to skim through, searching for the review link, determined to tear it apart.

Initially, sets her username as 'future_hayley', just like on LiveJournal, but just as she's about to hit 'submit' on her scathing review of the first chapter (and its author), she has second thoughts. While it's not like she's planning to actually *do* anything with her LJ account—she really just created it to lurk on julia_alan—she doesn't want future_hayley to gain a reputation for being a troll either, just in case. A criminal mastermind always keeps her options open, after all, especially when it comes to plausible deniability. She still wants Justin to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's *her*, though, so...

Hmm, what to call herself? Could she get away with SelenaGmzSux here? Nah, too generic. There were already a ton of those over at LiveJournal, after all. Selena haters are a dime a dozen, apparently, and she wants something that's going to stick in his craw with surgical precision. The kind of name that will give him fits before he even *getsto* the review...

OK, so what else is really important to him, then? Biting the inside of her cheek lightly, she thinks back to his room the night before. His Captain Jim Bob Sherwood nightlight. His Star Wars-patterned sheets. His autographed *Tears of Blood* CDs. All his little dolls—action figures, whatever—carefully arranged on his bookshelves in their original, factory-sealed packaging. A half-assembled robot of some kind, sitting in the corner, beneath his framed print of—

"Oh!" she says suddenly, looking back up at her reflection, eyes shining with mischievous glee. "That's it!"

—of that old science dude with the crazy white hair and mustache, sticking his tongue out at the camera. Heinstein. Which she knows is totally not his real name, duh, but why bother to remember what it *really* is when getting it wrong gets such a rise out of him?

Glancing up at the mirror again, she grins to herself, literally. Perfect.

That decided, "Heinstein" proceeds to spend the rest of the evening in full-on troll mode, gleefully taking potshots at both oOO-Archimedes-O0o *and* his annoyingly twee little story, chapter by chapter.

Well, mostly. It's entirely possible that she gets a little hung up on how hard Julia is on Alan in chapter three. And it's maybe, once she's finished chapter six, she admits that she doesn't get why little Alan is so concerned about what Julia thinks of him, anyway. And perhaps when she finally gets to chapter eight—in which Alan saves Julia from her nemesis, the evil kinder-bitch Fifi, and is finally forced to reveal his secret to her—there's a chance that she admits that it, y'know, *wasn't bad*...

But then she gets to the end of chapter ten, and the last line of the story:

"Magic was real. He was a wizard. And Julia loved him again. For the moment, nothing else mattered. As far as Alan Rubik was concerned, all was right with the world."

It's adorable. Tooth-achingly sweet. And so heartfelt, so earnest, so undeniably *Justina* declaration, that it actually causes a lump to form in her throat, and tears to leap to her eyes.

Which, for reasons even *she* can't fathom, only serve to piss off Alex even more.

Seething—without being able to put her finger on the reason *why* she's seething, but not really caring, anyway—she clicks on the 'Review' link one last time, cracks her knuckles as the form loads itself up, then proceeds to peck away at the keyboard with all the furious purpose her index fingers can manage:

"Dude, is Alan on crack? Are YOU? Julia NEVER loved Alan! You'd think that'd be obvious, even to an egghead like you. I mean, duh! Have you even read the books at all, noob? The only person Julia even comes close to loving is herself."

Anyway, this story was SUPER boring! Especially that part, um, from the beginning of chapter one to the end of chapter ten? Boring enough that it actually put me to sleep my first time through. Zzzzzzz...!

On the other hand (and pay attention here, because I won't say it again) I didn't give up on it, so maybe it wasn't as boring as it could have been. You know how many stories I've bothered to read twice? Two! Charmed & Dangerous (well, most of the series, anyway), and this one. (Oh, and The Pokey Little Puppy when I was little, I guess. Man, now that was an awesome book.)

So, y'know, feel proud. Even though your ending totally sucks. Because Julia NEVER loved Alan.

Oh and BTW? Heinstein will never love Archimedes either."

Nodding to herself, Alex hits the 'submit' button without even bothering to read it over, before she can have second thoughts. Nice. A good, solid bit of trolling, there. OK, so maybe it kinda meandered a bit in the middle, but that last line? Killer. She can totally picture Justin's "allergies flaring up" as he reads it. Because that last line is devastating.

Snickering to herself (and ignoring the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, which she can totally chalk up to not having eaten

since breakfast, which was literally a pile of sugar), she heads back to Archimedes' profile, to take a look at the other story he's deigned her to read: *Firelight and Fidelity*.

"*Fidelity*? Seriously?" she snorts as she clicks on it. "Dude, who *talks* like that? Is that even a word?"

This one, it turns out, is something called a 'drabble'—a shorter-than-short story of exactly one hundred words in length. Alex can't help but smile at that. Now that's more her speed. It's a hell of a lot better than *twenty-five thousand* freaking words, anyway. All fics should be a hundred words or less. Hell, for that matter, all *books* should be, too...

"*The absolute truth about what happened that night in the jungle,*" the description reads. "*A quick drabble, written in response to all the smut-tastic fics that were borne of the infamous 'campfire scene' from Book 5, 'Charmed & Dangerous: The Crystal of Desire'. One-sided Jalan.*"

And just like that, Alex's smile quickly disappears.

She and Justin have never really talked about that night in the jungle, not really. Not even in their odd little annotation exchanges in the books—Justin's were mostly pretty clinical observations of how much his memory had begun to fail him by that point, while hers have mostly been reduced to pencil smudges after she'd chickened out and erased everything she'd confessed about how she'd been feeling at the time. Not that he'd had a chance to see it anyway, given that she still hasn't put Book Five back in his room.

It's funny, really. Almost the entire fandom, even the small pockets of it that aren't cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs where Jalan is concerned—sees the 'infamous campfire scene' as a major turning point in their relationship. Sure, there'd been shippy subtext layered into the books before, but with that scene, the unspoken heat simmering just beneath the surface between Alan and Julia became undeniable.

What was it Harper said, all those months ago? "*Heck, I knew they were brother and sister, and even I thought they might kiss!*"

"*So did I,*" had been Alex's response.

And so she had.

Because, if she's honest with herself, she has to admit that she's never felt as drawn to any of her three serious ex-boyfriends, neither before or since—not even to Mason, who she later spent *months* pining away for—as she did towards Justin that night. Not even *close*.

And it scared the ever-loving, mother puss-bucket *crap* out of her.

So she treated it like anything else that's ever frightened her, every other problem she's come across that she didn't immediately have a solution for: she ignored it, pretended it never happened, and hoped like hell it would just go away. Which is why they've never talked about it, why she's never asked him what was on *his* mind that night, how *he* was feeling. And why he's never told her.

Until, apparently, now. If, that is, she decides she really wants to know.

Finding her throat suddenly dry, Alex swallows twice to work some saliva down it, then takes a deep breath and drags the mouse pointer over to the story's title. She hesitates a moment, listening to the sound of her own quickening breath, then nods to herself ever so slightly, and clicks...

Author's Note: And that looks like a good place to wrap up this chapter. Yes, yes, I know. If I were reading this, I'd love to hate me, too.

I'll tell you what, though: anyone who's curious about what exactly Justin thought about that night might actually be able to *find* a drabble by the name of *Firelight and Fidelity* right here on , written by none other than o0O-Archimedes-O0o. Make sure to take a look at the reviews, too, because it's possible they might have some small bearing on the next chapter as well...

Speaking of reviews, I owe a huge shout-out to the "real" Heinstein, who so gloriously and unexpectedly role-played Alex in the reviews to the *other* Jalan fic that's referenced in this chapter, *Fortress of Solitude*. Make sure to check it out if you haven't already—her reactions were so hilarious and perfectly in-character that I absolutely had to weave them back into the main story. I took a little bit of liberty in paraphrasing her review of the final chapter to fit the story, but hopefully she doesn't mind. Thanks to everyone else who played along with us in the reviews, too—it was deliciously meta.

Thanks also, once again, to my beta-reader extraordinaire **Not Just a Nerd**, who continues to put up with me despite the fact that I

am a "huge, overthinking dork". Go read her own Jalex stories, if you haven't already. They, and she, are amazing.

And, as always, my deepest appreciation for your reviews, favorites and alerts. It still amazes me that a fic in which more than half the chapters feature Alex sitting alone somewhere, reading, has been so well-received. I honestly can't thank all of you enough for your support.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

xvii.

Books - *Charmed and Dangerous* - *Firelight and Fidelity*

o0O-Archimedes-O0o Author of 2 stories

Rated: **T** - English - Angst/Romance - Alan R. & Julia R. - Reviews: **8** - Published: 01-25-10 - id:6842368

Memory fading by inches. Sparks dancing in her eyes. The jungle waking around them as night falls. She's as frightened and vulnerable as she's ever allowed him to see, and she's never looked so achingly beautiful. Together they sit, on the precipice of doom, and all he can contemplate is how inviting her lips look in the flickering light of the campfire...

They might not exist tomorrow. What's there to lose, right?

(Wrong.)

Contrary to popular belief, nothing happens. Nothing...save that he holds her in the night, after the fire dies, to keep her warm.

(...or so he tells himself.)

[Review this story](#)

Reviews for **Firelight and Fidelity**:

[More Than a Geek](#) 2010 - 01 - 25 . chapter 1

Aww. You know, i always hate drabbles. It seems like they say too little and don't make a point. But this one said so much in such short length. Much more than your freaking long fics may have said. I loved your phrasing. And it was overall adorable. You don't need to write angst, but i think you'd do good in non comedy romance fluff genre. Just saying :p

[jlnpedia](#) 2010 - 01 - 25 . chapter 1

Beautiful.

Alan is too uptight not to think about consequences, even with the world ending around him - anything that would be started there, would have to be started by Julia, because he'd never let himself cross that line.

He'd do anything for her - and that includes carry a torch without ever saying a thing, forever.

[iluvwalt](#) 2010 - 01 - 26 . chapter 1

Short and sweet! :) Really liked it.

[RoYalFlush4](#) 2010 - 01 - 26 . chapter 1

Hm...

You did the right thing, Alan.

She's your sister, and that's all she'll ever be.

If Julia had suggested something, though? Well, all bets are off...

Baby Baku 2010 - 01 - 26 . chapter 1

Short but very beautiful and speaks volumes. :)

anon 2010 - 01 - 26 . chapter 1

Yeah, but that's what Alan thinks...

Julia wished for everything to be the same though, so his memory might be just a little bit faulty to preserve their previous relationship. Keep things from getting weird.

Heinstein 2010 - 01 - 29 . chapter 1

...

Do you know just how much of a perv you look like, sometimes?

[Return to top](#)

xviii.

"Alex?" Harper says, frowning down at her from the top of the basement stairs, two days before New Year's. "What are you doing in my room?"

Alex's entire body jolts upward in fright and surprise at the sudden interruption, and doesn't quite shove the book she's been reading underneath Harper's pillow quick enough for the redhead not to notice. Lounging back against the headboard of Harper's bed, she makes a show of staring vacantly at the dryer as Harper ducks beneath the dented pipe that hangs over the landing.

"Nothin'," Alex sighs, with faux-boredom. "Just waiting for my laundry to finish."

"Uh, you don't *do* laundry, Alex," Harper points out, her frown deepening as she walks downstairs towards her. "You just wait until the pile of clothes on your floor gets too big to step over, then magic them clean. Or until your mom does it for you, whichever comes first."

"I know *that*," Alex retorts evenly, after a beat. "I'm just...sitting here...waiting for Mom and Dad's laundry to finish, so I can...find out what happens to it next. Y'know, on the off chance that Justin or Max win the competition, and I'm actually forced to do it for myself, someday."

"But..." Harper blinks at her, then glances towards the silent laundry area across from the bed. "The washer and dryer aren't even *on*, Alex..."

Alex cocks an eyebrow, then turns to look at them herself for a long moment, as she tries to figure out what to say next. "Well, *now* you tell me. Where have *you* been for the last four hours?"

"Alex, come on," Harper scoffs, tilting her head to the side and crossing her arms over her chest. "Why are you hiding out down here? And did I just see you actually reading a book?"

"Nooooooo!" Alex protests. Harper tilts her head knowingly to one side, and Alex rolls her eyes as she relents. "Well yes, obviously. Damn you for learning to stop and duck under that stupid pipe. Anyone else in this family I would have heard coming a mile away..."

"Wow, you're seriously *reading*?" Harper says, amazed. Glancing over her shoulder towards the top of the stairs, Harper hurries over to the bed and sits down next to Alex, leaning forward and grinning conspiratorially. "Did you swipe another one of your mom's smutty romance novels to skim the dirty parts?"

"No!" Alex says, indignant. "I *do* read more than just smut, thank you very much! Besides, those books? Lemme tell ya somethin': *super* vanilla compared to some of the stuff on the kink meme. I mean wow..."

"The what? What the heck is a kinkmeem? Is that a wizard thing?"

"Uh...sure it is," Alex shrugs, waving one hand dismissively. "Look, I just wanted to be alone where no one would think to look for me, OK? And Mom and Dad would have kittens if I went out in this stupid snowstorm. You don't mind if I hang out here, do you?"

"Alex, of course not! *Mi casa es su casa!*" Harper beams, wrapping both of her hands around Alex's. Then, because Alex is staring back at her blankly, on account of Harper having done virtually all her homework since kindergarten, she patiently adds: "My home is your home."

"Technically speaking, *su casa es mi basement*, but whatever," Alex snorts, stretching back out on the bed as she tugs her book out from underneath the pillow. "Listen, would you be a doll and run upstairs to grab me a Cherry Coke outta the fridge? Ooo, and some pickles, maybe? I'm starving to death."

"*Charmed & Dangerous: The Crystal of Desire*," Harper mutters, craning her neck and squinting as she reads the title off the front cover. "Oh wow...so you're not only *reading* a book, but actually *re-reading one you've already read*? And it *isn't* a smutty romance novel? Are you sure you're feeling OK?"

"All right, Harper," Alex says flatly, glaring at her over the top of the book as she pulls out the paintbrush she's been using as a bookmark. "I typically don't like to read. You're amazed. I get it. Can we drop it, already? That Cherry Coke isn't going to get itself..."

"Hey wait...is that the book with the campfire scene?"

"Oh, sweet zombie Jesus, what is it with you people and that goddamned campfire scene?" Alex snaps, her cheeks flushing guiltily even as she slams the book shut again.

(Because it's not like that was the scene she was reading, or anything. Or *re-re-re-reading*, for like the bazillionth time today. Nope. Not even.)

"You people?" Harper asks, looking back over her shoulder as if to see if there's someone else there. "Who else—?"

"It's like nothing else happened at all!" Alex continues to rant. "I mean, hello? Julia beating Alan and winning the wizard competition? Becoming a full wizard and saving the day? Only to selflessly give up her powers to bring her brothers back, so that everything can go back to normal? This is pretty important stuff, here! But does anybody talk about that? *Noooooooooooo!* All anybody focuses on is the thirteen lousy pages where they're acting all scared and schmoopy over a campfire! And nothing even happened, anyway!"

"Um...OK," Harper says, one eyebrow raised. "Taking it a little personally there, aren't you?"

"OF COURSE I'M TAKING IT PERSONALLY, HARPER! THE BOOK'S ABOUT ME!"

"Right, right...sorry, I forgot," Harper says, holding up both hands and patting the air placatingly. She lowers them slowly, then gingerly sits down next to Alex on the bed and folds them into her lap. "Alex, did something happen between you and Justin?"

"No!" Alex blurts out, eyes wide as she sits back up. "Nothing happened! Didn't I just say that? Nothing! Zip! Zilch! Nada! I didn't *want* it to, either! And I sure as hell didn't wish everything back to the way it was just so it *seemed* like nothing had happened, OK? Look, it's right here in black and white if you don't believe me—"

"Alex..." Smiling gently, Harper takes Alex's hand in both of hers while giving her a look of absolute duh. "I meant *today*. Did you and Justin have a fight, or something?"

Alex blinks as this brings her up short. "What? No, I haven't talked to Justin all day. Why?"

"Well, while you've been hiding down here all afternoon, avoiding everyone and obviously having some kind of freak-out," Harper replies, "Justin's been moping in the kitchen of the Sub Station, getting everyone's orders wrong and he muttering to himself."

Alex can't help but wince at this. "Really?"

"Yeah," Harper sighs, shaking her head. "Let me guess: drama over your new relationship?"

"Uh..." Alex's eyebrows draw themselves together as her forehead furrows in confusion. "I'm not exactly sure what you mean by that..."

"I'm sorry, Alex. I blame myself!" Harper says, all in a rush. "I guess I shouldn't have told him about that boy you've been texting with. I forgot about how weird he gets whenever you start dating somebody new."

"No, Harper, it's not your fault. I'm the one who—" Alex breaks off as the last bit of what Harper just said sinks in. "Wait, he gets weird? What do you mean? Weird how?"

"Oh, you know," says Harper, waving one hand dismissively. "All big-brotherly and super-protective? Like when you get a spell wrong? Only...more."

Alex frowns at this. "More?"

"Well, I mean...I've never *had* a big brother," Harper explains, "but he gets so intense about it. If I didn't know better, I'd swear that he almost seems *jealous* sometimes!"

"Huh." Alex glances down at the book in her lap, and sighs. "Funny how I've never noticed."

"Seriously? How could you *not* notice? The way he glares at any boy who so much as notices you? I thought Mason might actually be in serious trouble until we found out he was a werewolf."

Alex snorts again, as she flashes back momentarily to what Justin had said, back when she'd started seeing Dean: that he wished she'd date someone he actually had a hope in hell of intimidating. And it honestly *did* look like he'd finally lucked out with the primly British Mason, at least until the first full moon had come along.

"I mean I never noticed how weird it was," she says, without looking up from the book in her lap. "That's just how things have always been between us. I guess I always thought it was just normal brother-sister stuff."

"Normal for *you two*, maybe," Harper replies, "but let's be honest, here: your family's definition of 'normal' is different from most people's."

A smile tugs at the corners of Alex's lips as she finally looks back up at her best friend. "You mean we're not normal people?"

And now it's Harper's turn to snort. "Are you kidding? Honey, the *light* from normal would take a million years to reach you."

"Reach *us*," Alex corrects her, chucking her affectionately in the shoulder. "You're a Russo too now, remember."

Harper smiles, and her eyes go soft at the corners, the way they always do whenever one of them calls her an honorary Russo, which is part of the reason why Alex does it as often as she does. Yeah, making other people happy isn't exactly at the top of her list of priorities—or anywhere in the middle, really—but for Harper Finkle, she makes the exception. Especially since it takes little-to-no effort, which is always a big plus in Alex's book.

Blinking back happy tears, Harper takes a breath to compose herself, and changes the subject. (Again, just like she always does, which is the *other* part of the reason why Alex does it so often. And so what? Look, just because you have ulterior motives for doing a nice thing doesn't make it any less nice.)

"So are you actually gonna tell me anything about this new boy in your life?" Harper asks, leaning over to nudge Alex in the ribs. "Or am I going to have to mention him *another* few dozen times before you finally give in?"

"Ugh," Alex groans, shoulders slumping. That was *not* the subject she was hoping the redhead would change it to. "Harper, look...it's not what you think...and stop looking at me like that, OK? I'm not trying to dodge the question because it's Jeremy from Science..."

Harper narrows her eyes at her. "Honest?"

"Harper, Jeremy from Science doesn't even exist!" Alex snaps, irritated. But then, off the crestfallen on her friend's face: "Uh, I mean he doesn't know *I* exist. He's, um, so into you that he's never so much as even looked at me."

"Awwww, that's so *him*," Harper sighs happily. "You know, if Zeke doesn't wise up and ask me out before he graduates, I should really stop toying with poor Jeremy and finally give him a shot. Just as soon as I figure out who he is, exactly..."

Alex fights the urge to roll her eyes. Almost a year she's been keeping up this charade now, but telling Harper that "*Jeremy from Science*" had been a hairy three-legged goblin with zero interest in her whatsoever would be like admitting there was no such thing as Santa Claus.

"So how did you meet him?" Harper asks.

"Who, Jeremy? Uh..."

"No, silly! Your mystery boy! Do I know him? Does he go to Tribeca Prep?"

"Um, no! Because he's...a wizard!" Alex says, improvising on the fly. "And he, uh...lives far away from here. In the Wizard World. Yeah, that works."

"Oh!" Harper says, then purses her lips to the side in confusion. "So then how *did* you two meet? At Wiz-Tech? Oh wait, is it that Guy Normous boy? He was cute!"

"Oh *hell*, no!" Alex blurts out, shaking her head frantically. Because as sweet a guy as Hugh is, God forbid that anybody actually think that she *dated* him. "Nonono, we...um...met online. On, uh, WizFace."

(OK, not bad for having been put on the spot. The best lies always have a grain of truth to them, after all. Makes them sound plausible, not to mention easier to remember later. The WizFace thing makes her sound kind of lame, granted, but it's preferable to the truth. Besides, it's not like Harper really has a frame of reference to really judge exactly how lame it is...)

"WizFace, really?" Harper grins. "But I thought you said only losers like Justin dated freaks from WizFace. He's not something weird like a centaur or a cyber-demon robot, is he?"

"Nng," Alex grunts. Oh right, she'd *given* Harper a frame of reference for exactly how lame it is—her, and anyone else who'd listen. "Look, I'm not even *dating* him, OK? We're just..."

Harper waits silently for a moment after she trails off, then leans forward with an expect smile. "Just what? Chatting? Flirting?"

Alex shrugs as she gropes for the right word to describe exactly what she and Justin are doing. They definitely aren't *talking*, that's for goddamn sure, given that she's spent the entire weekend avoiding him. Not that he'd probably want to talk to her anyway, not if he's read Heinsteins reviews.

"I don't know *what* we're doing, exactly," she confesses. "We're kind of dancing around the issue, I guess."

"You? Dance around an issue instead of facing it head on? I'm shocked," Harper says flatly, but smiles to take the sting out of it. "The issue in question being..."

Alex rolls her eyes, reluctant to talk about it, but needing to at the same time. And it's not like Harper knows it's Justin they're talking about here, so...

"We've just known each other for a long time," she says, "and I guess maybe there's always been *something* there the whole time, like under the surface? But we never talked about it, or even thought about it really, because it would be...weird."

"Aha, but now that you're finally over Mason, I'm guessing he wants to talk about it."

"It's...come up, yeah," Alex nods, shifting uncomfortably on the bed. "Not in so many words, but he's kinda sorta admitted to...certain things...without really coming out and saying them, y'know? And I've...well..."

"Been a little bit of a bitch in response?"

Alex drops her chin as she glares at Harper with a mixture of anger and surprise.

"Sorry Alex," Harper says, "but, historically speaking, the way you tend to deflect situations that confuse you, or make you uncomfortable, is to—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Alex quietly cuts her off, glancing back down at the book in her lap. "Cue the hateful bitch."

"I wouldn't say hateful. Defensive, maybe. Anyone who really loves you can tell the difference." Harper gathers her legs under her to sit cross-legged on the bed, then leans towards Alex with her elbows propped on her knees. "So, he likes you?"

Alex hesitates, then nods silently, dipping her forehead just enough for Harper to tell, because she still can't bring herself to say it out loud.

"And do you like him?"

Alex heaves a sigh that feels like it comes all the way from the core of her being, and brushes her hair away from her face. "I don't know, Harper. It's really complicated."

"Uh-huh, sure it is," Harper smirks, then reaches over to rap her knuckle against the cover of Book Five. "And it's just coincidence that suddenly you're all into reading books and playing with your new Macbook. The same way you were suddenly into baseball when you liked Riley, or cars when you were falling for Dean."

Alex feels her cheeks and the back of her neck starting to get warm, even as she oh-so-casually moves the book off her lap and places it beside her on the bed, out of Harper's reach. "It's not the same thing."

"Of course it isn't, honey," Harper nods, reaching up to pat Alex's cheek, before Alex swats her hand away. "Listen, is he pressuring you to do anything weird? Like asked you to meet him alone in person, or send him racy pictures or...y'know, dirty stuff?"

"Nonono, of course not!" Alex says. "He'd never do that, anyway. I'd have to be the one to—"

She breaks off mid-sentence as she realizes what she was about to say, and groans inwardly. Goddamn it. Some way, somehow, she's going to figure out who jlnpedia really is and where he lives, so she can flash herself there and smack him upside his stupid, know-it-all head. (He'd just better not turn out be right about the whole submissive thing, too, or there was going to be *serious* hell to pay.)

"He hasn't really asked anything of me, actually," she tells Harper instead, after a second. "He's just kind of put himself out there, that's all. Run it up the flagpole to see if I salute, y'know?"

"So then what's the harm in saluting?" Harper asks. "As long as it's innocent, and you're keeping it strictly online for now, why not just go with it and see what happens? Can't hurt."

"I guess..." Alex says, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. "What happens online says online, right?"

"Nobody says it has to go any further than that unless you want it to," Harper says. "I mean, you'll want to be careful of course, not give him your real name or your address, or anything. You don't want to wind up with a stalker..."

"Oh well, duh!" Alex scoffs, even though that ship has clearly sailed. Because if Justin really wanted to stalk her, all he'd have to do is cast *Go Thru, Mo Thru* on the wall that separated their bedrooms. "So what am I supposed to do? Just come out and tell him straight up? Because I don't think I can do that, Harper. For one thing, I'm not sure he'd believe it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I've kind of spent the entire weekend convincing him that I *don't* like him that way..."

"Oh."

"...and, uh, probably never will. Except not so much with the 'probably' part."

"Ohhhhh!" Harper says, shaking her head at Alex in disappointment. "Can't you just tell him you didn't really mean it?"

"See, thing is, I kind of *did* really mean it at the time," Alex says, wincing ever so slightly. "I mean *really* really. I might have beaten that point to death, actually..."

"A-lex!" Harper groans, as she reaches up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "What is it with you? Have you ever managed to be completely straightforward with anybody about *anything*?"

"Not on purpose, no," Alex snickers. Then, off the glare that Harper gives her, she throws her hands up and whines: "What? I was completely freaked out! Cue the hateful bitch, remember? Just tell me how to fix it, OK? Please?"

"Guh!" Pushing herself up off the bed, Harper begins pacing in circles, back and forth next to the bed, like a wartime general formulating a battle plan. "All right, clearly you're going to have to make it up to him. Exactly how bad is the damage, though? Is he still talking to you, at least?"

"I have no idea, actually," Alex replies. "I've kind of been avoiding him. But as far as I can tell, he hasn't exactly made an effort to come looking for me, so..."

"We'll have to assume the worst," Harper says, frowning at the floor and stroking her chin as she paces. "OK, actions speak louder than words. What we need here is some kind of grand romantic gesture that shows him how you really feel about him, in spite of everything you've said..."

"I dunno, Harper," Alex says reluctantly. "Hearts and flowers isn't exactly my style. Besides, that sounds like a lotta work."

"Look, do you want my help fixing this, or not?"

"I do! I do!" Alex holds up both hands in surrender, then drops them into her lap, slumps her shoulders and sighs. "What do you want me to do?"

"Well, if it was *me*," Harper says, staring off into space as she continues to walk back and forth, "I'd design an outfit that let him know *exactly* how I felt. No wait, a whole *series* of outfits! One for each day of the week—no, the *month*—each of them with his name incorporated into it, somehow! What *is* his name, anyway?"

"Um, Ar-Archimedes," Alex stammers.

Harper stops in her tracks and blinks at her. "A *Once And Future King* reference? Nice! You could really do a lot with the whole owl motif..."

"Hey! I am not about to dress up like Big Bird for anyone, all right?"

"No, you wouldn't be able to pull it off anyway," Harper says with a grimace, which leaves Alex feeling vaguely offended. But before she can open her mouth and demand to know *why* she couldn't pull it off, Harper snaps her fingers and points at her. "I know! You can paint him something! Not one of those creepy 'wolf howling at the moon' pictures you've been doing, but something *good*..."

Alex gapes at her, mouth hanging open, then leaps up off the bed to frantically fish her Blackberry out of her pocket.

"Uh, Alex? You OK?" Harper asks, one eyebrow raised, as Alex begins frantically stabbing the keys of her phone so quickly that her thumbs are practically a blur. "Did he just send you a BBM, or—?"

"You are a freakin' *genius*, Harper," Alex cuts her off, without looking up from her phone. "Listen, you think you can sweet-talk Zeke into helping us with something? Without telling Justin about it?"

"Um, I guess?" Harper says uncertainly. "It might help if I knew what..."

"With the picture I just emailed to you," Alex says, eyes dancing as she grins up at her triumphantly. "I need him to show me how to post it on LiveJournal."

Author's Note: Yes, I know that the most recent review actually shows up on top here at , but that takes all the fun out of Heinsteins sucker punch. I'm claiming artistic license on this one. Thanks once again to the "real" Heinsteins for providing that beautiful sucker punch in the first place, as well the other reviewers of *Firelight and Fidelity*, most of whose kind words appear at the beginning of this chapter. An extra-special shout out goes to jlnpedia (AKA tilante, of *Alex Gets Punished* fame, in case you weren't aware) for taking my good-natured ribbing of his AGP series from the last chapter in the spirit it was intended, as well as providing Alex with some serious food for thought in this one. If you're a Jalex fan and you're not reading his stuff, you're doing yourself a real disservice, because it's awesome.

My apologies for the lack of Jalex fan service in this chapter, but that's coming, I promise. I know it seems like not much happened in this one, but this is actually a fairly major turning point that I've been writing towards for awhile now. And I'm not just talking about Alex finally confronting Justin's feelings for her, either. ;)

Huge thanks as always to everyone who's taken the time to read, review, favorite, or put either *OTP* or myself on their alerts. Whether you've just discovered it, or you've stuck it out with me since the very beginning of this strangely meta fic, it's greatly appreciated.

I'll close this off with two odd trivia notes: 1) I think this may be the first chapter in which I didn't explicitly reference the hotness that is Selena Gomez in some way. (Er, until just now, I mean. Whoops!) 2) A gold star to anyone who caught the super-obscure reference to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in this chapter, made all the more sweet because the line was delivered by a redhead. Oh Willow Rosenberg, how I miss thee!

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 10**

xix.

"Wait, why are we doing this again?"

"Because Alex is trying to impress a boy, Zeke."

"Pfft, *trying*? Harper, please. *Trying* implies the possibility of—"

"Effort?"

"...I was actually gonna go with '*failure*', but thank you for that."

"Sorry, Alex."

"My point is that when I, God forbid, make an *effort* to impress a boy, *I impress the boy*. You get me?"

"Right, do or do not, there is no try, words to live by. What I meant was: why are we doing this on *LiveJournal* of all places?"

"Not that I actually *care*, Zeke, but you have some kind of nerd-centric problem with that?"

"Uh, only that we might as well be putting it up on MySpace? Or *Geocities*, for crying out loud?"

"Aaaaaand again? In words we non-dorks will understand this time?"

"Alex, LiveJournal is so 2008. In internet years, that's practically millenia ago. Nobody bothers with it, anymore. Tumblr is where it's at, now."

"And I'm supposed to take advice on what's cutting-edge from a dude who spent most of last night prancing around in wooden shoes?"

"Be nice, Alex. Zeke is trying to *help* you, remember?"

"But I *hate* Tumblr! It's like LiveJournal's retarded little brother!"

"Alex, what have we said about using the r-word?"

"Ugh, fine...it's LiveJournal's *differently-abled* little brother, then. Happy now, Little Miss Social Justice?"

"Uh, pardon me ladies, but just because Tumblr has a more streamlined and user-friendly aesthetic than LiveJournal does *not* make it retar—I mean, um, inferior. In fact, it's been designed specifically with technologically unsophisticated individuals like yourselves in mind. That's the beauty of it!"

"No, that's my *problem* with it. Any site that's been dumbed-down enough for someone as lazy as *me* to use is clearly not something I want any part of."

"Heh. Thank you, Groucho Marx."

"Oh, so suddenly I'm a bitchy green Muppet who lives in a trash can because I don't like Tumblr? Jeez, Harper, just whose side are you on?"

"What? No honey, Groucho Marx was a—look, just forget it. Zeke, we *have* to put it up on LiveJournal because that's where Alex met her little cyber-crush, OK? It's romantic!"

"But we could just put it up on Tumblr and link—"

"Zeke..."

"Alright, alright, alright...but I want it stated on the record that I am doing this under extreme protest!"

"Uh, hello? Do you *see* one of those little old court-reporter ladies from *Law & Order* sitting in my living room with that freaky little typewriter thing? No? Then quit whining and make with the geek mojo or whatever, already."

"Ahem? Quit whining and make with the geek mojo or whatever...*what?*"

"...orrrrr whatever you love most in the world will become only the *first* piece of my brand-new 'Zeke's Favorite Things From His Room' collection?"

"Uh, I think the magic word Zeke was probably shooting for there was 'please', Alex."

"True, actually, but I'm willing to overlook it in the interest of keeping my 1974 Mego Batgirl doll safe in her original factory-sealed, mint-condition packaging. Let's get started, shall we?"

"Wow, really? You're gonna fold just like that? Man, you're way easier to blackmail than Justin. I'll have to remember that."

"Say, why *didn't* you just get the J-Man to help you with this?"

"That's a long story, Zeke..."

"And why do all these people on your friends list have Selena Gomez or David Whatshisname in their user pics?"

"That's an even longer story. Look, could we knock it off with the twenty questions and just get on with this, already?"

"Sure, sure. That's a good place to start, actually: do *you* have a particular user pic in mind for this post?"

"A whatnow?"

"Y'know, an icon? The little picture that goes in the top left-hand corner of your post that identifies you?"

"Um, do I need one?"

"Well, that depends: do you *want* to look like complete and utter n00bsauce?"

"Uh...don't have clue one what that's supposed to mean, but from the tone of your voice, I'mma guess *no*."

"Oh, by the power of Greyskull..."

"Zeke, relax. Breathe. It's fine. Can't we just download one for her?"

"What? Are you *nuts*? The user pic is your brand! Your very online identity! It's meant to be as uniquely individual as a precious snowflake bearing your fingerprint!"

"Um, OK..."

"And you can't just have *one*! You need dozens! Baker's dozens! One to suit each and every possible mood..."

"Ooo, sort of like outfits! Like, you have a cupcake-themed one for days you're feeling sweet, and a lemon-themed one for when you're in a sour mood?"

"Precisely!"

"Uh, shyeah no. *Way* too much work. Here, see that one? I like that one. Let's just use that one."

"Alex, haven't you been listening to a single word I've said?"

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

"You can't just use that one! It belongs to somebody else!"

"Uh, and? Listen, let's just steal it and, like, throw a sepia tone over it with Photoshop, or whatever. Done. Like anybody's even gonna notice, anyway..."

"Wh-what? You want to...I'm just supposed to...you want me to...to..."

"Zeke? Are you OK? Zeke?"

"..."

"Alex, his face is getting really red..."

"Ugh. Yo, Earth calling Clog-Boy, come in Clog-boy...seriously, dude, what's up with the whole creepy Rain-Man act?"

"WHAT'S UP? I REFUSE TO BE A PARTY TO THIS CYBER-CHICANERY EVEN A MINUTE LONGER, THAT'S WHAT'S UP! THESE ARE THE MORAL BUILDING BLOCKS UPON WHICH OUR ONLINE SOCIETY IS FOUNDED, AND YOU ARE MAKING A MOCKERY OF THEM! WHY NOT JUST...JUST PEE ALL OVER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WHILE YOU'RE AT IT, WHY DON'T YOU? WELL, BY GOLLY, I SAY THEE NAY! I WON'T DO IT, AND BARBARA GORDON BE DAMNED. GOOD DAY TO YOU, MISS!"

"Zeke wait! We—"

"I SAID GOOD DAY!"

xx.

It takes twenty minutes of convincing on Harper's part, a promise from Alex that she'll sit on the other side of the room and keep her hands tucked behind her back, and an invitation to dinner for Ten-Cheese Enchilada Surprise from Theresa before Zeke reluctantly agrees to come back in off the terrace and help post the photo of Alex's painting. It takes *another* twenty minutes of him breathing into a paper bag with his head between his knees, while Harper soothingly rubs his back between his shoulder blades, before he's calmed down enough to actually *work*.

Of course, Zeke insists on setting up every single facet of her LiveJournal *just so* first, including the creation of a unique user pic for every conceivable emotion or combination thereof she might ever experience. So what *should* be a little two-minute favor turns into a two-hour ordeal. Alex watches in boredom from the opposite end of the living room as Harper and Zeke sit side-by-side on the orange loveseat, pecking away at her Macbook, giggling and chatting excitedly over design ideas. She does try to sneak away once, thinking they won't notice, but a pointed glare from Harper over the brushed chrome of the monitor makes her slink back down into her seat. Mere mortal or no, her best friend can be even scarier than a cucuy when she really wants to be.

It's funny, but watching them work kinda sorta makes her appreciate all the times that Justin's helped her with stuff like this, all that much more. Because as difficult as he can be to manipulate, and as much of an anal-retentive, perfectionist fuss bucket as he can be sometimes, he's practically *normal* compared to Zeke. Say what you will about Justin's annoying know-it-all tendencies, and his need to run off at the mouth and lecture her while he does it (as if she actually gave a damn), at least he knows how to *get shit done*, instead of dithering for twenty minutes about what freaking *font* to use. Justin gets in, does what he needs to do, and gets out. Wham, bam, thank you ma'am.

(And she totally doesn't turn red at her choice of words there, because they're completely innocent without a shred of innuendo whatsoever. And they're absolutely not accompanied by the kind of mental images that would make even Jlnpedia have to fan himself. Nope. Not at all. Because that would be...bad, right? Not to mention a higher level of awkward than she thinks she's equipped to deal with...)

Oh well. At least Zeke and Harper are having a good time with each other, which ought to make Harper happy. That's something, at least...even though she can practically hear the anguished screams of Sayley fans echoing around the world as their preferred fanon ship is effectively sunk. And while she sympathizes with them a little—she's always kind of shipped Sayley (Sam/Hayley) herself, especially since Max hit his growth spurt last year—after seeing them together like this, she does have to admit that Zayley (Zack/Hayley) is probably canon for good reason. There's a certain undeniable *rightness* to it, after all, what with each of them being her and Justin's wacky best friends...

"Ugh, knock it off," she mutters to herself, annoyed at how tightly her invisible shipping goggles appear to be strapped to her stupid head. "You sound like such a nerd."

"Sorry," Harper and Zeke murmur automatically in the same breath, without looking up from the screen. Then, realizing what they've done, they actually do tear their gaze away long enough to look in each other's eyes, smiling in surprise and amusement before they both blush darkly and look away again.

Alex rolls her own eyes and heaves a sigh. Great. Well, *there's* about three pages of schmoopy fluff she can look forward to reading, once she actually starts Book Six, knowing Future Harper's penchant for florid prose. Gag. As if witnessing it first-hand wasn't bad enough...

"Zeke? Is that you up there?"

A sudden chill shoots right up Alex's spine as Justin's voice breaks into her thoughts, accompanied by the sound of his footsteps treading up the black spiral staircase to her left. She locks eyes with Harper, who looks just as stunned Alex feels. For a split

second she wonders why, before she remembers that Harper thinks Justin has some kind of problem with the boy crushing on Alex, not realizing that he is the boy crushing on Alex.

(Ugh, when did her life get so goddamned complicated?)

Stupid. In hindsight, they really should have done this up in her room, where Justin would have been less likely to walk in on them. But then she hadn't expected it to take nearly *three freakin' hours*...

Before either of them can so much as hiss at Zeke to be cool, though, Justin's head appears between the black standards of the railing as he walks up the stairs from the Sub Station, still wearing his apron. He raises an eyebrow at Zeke and Harper as he glimpses them sitting side-by-side on the loveseat.

"Oh, so that was you I heard," he says to Zeke with a puzzled frown. "What are you still doing here, man? I thought you went home ages—"

He breaks off as he steps up into the living room and finally notices Alex sitting there in the orange easy chair, legs draped lazily over the arm, staring back at him. She feels the skin behind her ears getting warm as they get their first really good look at each other in the nearly two days since "Heinstein" trashed his fic, and she oh-so-coincidentally started avoiding him.

Green, she can't help but think to herself, because that's the color Justin will have highlighted this whole scene in, if it's made it into Book Six.

At least a half-dozen different emotions seem to be swirling in his grey-green eyes as she watches, fighting for dominance, the most obvious of which is hurt. Followed pretty closely by anger, confusion, and maybe a little bit of sadness. And it breaks Alex's heart a little, because she's kinda-sorta the reason for all of them. Eventually, though, he seems to settle on suspicion, his eyes narrowing into a glare.

"What's going on here?" he asks warily, frowning as he glances from Alex to Harper and Zeke, then back again.

"What's it look like, egghead?" she asks. She shrugs one shoulder with an air of lazy indifference that she definitely doesn't feel. "We're all just hanging out. What's it to you?"

"Uh huh. Because the two of you hanging out with Zeke of your own free will when I'm not around isn't unusual or suspicious at all," Justin snorts as he crosses his arms over his chest. "Uh...no offense, Zeke."

"None taken, J-Man," Zeke says, nodding sagely as the keyboard clicks under his fingertips. "Two hot girls chilling with me with no ulterior motives whatsoever? Sounds plenty suspicious to me, bro."

Alex tilts her head to the side to glare flatly at Zeke for practically selling her out, then rolls her eyes at the way Harper blushes and preens over the compliment. Justin blinks at them thoughtfully for a moment, then shakes his head sharply and turns his attention back to his sister.

"That's not true, Zeke," Alex says through clenched teeth, the flatness of her tone betraying her. "We just *love* chilling with you."

"Yeah, sure you do," Justin says, crossing his arms over his chest. (And, augh, but she wishes she'd stop noticing when he did that.) "Care to explain what Zeke and Harper are doing with your Macbook? Wait, no, let me guess: you've tricked them into doing your Spanish homework for you, again."

"Pfft, guess again, dork," Alex snaps, stung by the accusation, even as the rational part of her mind tells her that he's just taking his anger over the past few days out on her, and that she probably deserves it. "Not even."

"Fine, so it's your English homework then. Same difference," Justin snorts, then turns and takes a step towards Harper and Zeke. "Here, let me see that..."

Moving quickly, Alex jumps up off the chair and shoves past Justin to put herself between him and the others. He stops short and glares at her as she places her hands on her hips and juts her chin out at him in defiance.

"I said it's not homework, Justin," she growls, fighting to keep the panic out of her voice. "Now get lost and leave us alone."

"Oh, please. If you're not cheating, then why are you trying so hard to keep me from seeing what they're doing?"

"Because it's none of your goddamned business what they're doing, that's why!"

Justin chuckles bitterly. "You'll forgive me if I don't exactly feel comfortable taking you at your word."

"Fine, *don't* take my word, then." Alex turns her head to look over her shoulder at Harper and Zeke. "Go ahead, Harp. Tell ferret-face that he's wrong for once in his pathetic life."

"She's telling the truth, Justin," Harper nods, without hesitation. "Honest."

Alex looks back at her brother, eyes shining triumphantly. Looking past her, Justin eyes Harper skeptically for a moment, then shifts his gaze to his best friend. "Zeke?"

Without changing her expression, or taking her eyes off Justin, Alex subtly holds her breath. *Be cool, Zeke, please be cool...*

"Well, technically it's more blackmail she's using than outright trickery," Zeke says from behind her, without looking up from the screen in front of him. "But it's true that this is definitely *not* homework..."

Justin's frown deepens in suspicion as his eyes move from Zeke to Alex, even as she favors him with a shit-eating 'I told you so' grin. "It's not? You're sure?"

"Nope! Not unless she's taking extra credits in the fine art of cyber-seduction," Zeke grins, as he taps away eagerly on the Macbook's keyboard. "Just call me Zeke Beekerman, I.T. Consultant of Love!"

The grin slides right off Alex's face, even as Justin's eyebrows threaten to leap into orbit. The two of them just stand there for a long moment, staring at each other, the soft clicking of the Macbook's keys the only sound breaking the pregnant silence that hangs between them.

Well, shit. That's what she gets for hoping Zeke could actually be cool.

"I.T. Consultant of *what*?" Justin asks, finally.

And then Alex shouts "RUN FOR IT!" over her shoulder to Harper as she leaps forward and crash-tackles Justin to the couch, pinning him bodily beneath her. Zeke squeals and automatically curls himself up into the fetal position, covering his head with both arms as though he believes Alex might attack him next.

"NOT IN THE FACE! NOT IN THE FACE!"

The Macbook spills off his lap as he draws his knees up to his chest, but Harper—used to this sort of thing after years of friendship with Alex—springs into action immediately, snatching the MacBook out of the air before it can hit the ground, and tucking it under her arm as she turns to sprint towards the stairs.

"Alex! What the hell...?" Justin growls as he squirms beneath her on the sofa, struggling to untangle his limbs from hers.

With a skill borne from years of tickle-fights, water wars and knock-down, drag-out battles over the TV remote, Alex manages to keep herself on top of him, despite his best efforts to flip her over...but she can't deny that, this time, something is drastically different. She's never halfway *wanted* him to flip her over before, for one thing. Or been so conscious of the fact that she's not wearing a bra beneath her sweater as she mashes her chest against his. And it's certainly never occurred to her to wonder if it's *really* the handle of his wand that's digging into her hip through his jeans. Flushed and breathing heavily (and it's totally just from the exertion, really), she grabs both his wrists and pins his arms to his sides, then risks a glance up at Harper, to see how close she is to getting away—

—and then suddenly, Alex finds herself sprawled face first on the sofa, alone. Blinking in confusion, she pushes herself up off the cushions and whips her head around, just in time to see Justin standing at the foot of the spiral stairs, two steps below the still-sprinting Harper. Holding her Macbook open with both hands, he stares at the screen in open-mouthed horror, even as he slowly lowers one foot to the ground, as though he'd been hopping on the other.

(Oh. Dammit. So maybe that actually was his wand digging into her hip, after all...)

Harper practically screeches to a stop in the middle of the yellow staircase as she belatedly realizes that she's not carrying the laptop to safety anymore, and spins on her heels to stare at Justin in shock.

"How did you—? Justin Russo, did you actually just cast a spell on—?"

"Harper!" Alex snaps, cutting her off in mid-scolding as she jerks a thumb towards Zeke. The redhead immediately slaps a hand over her mouth, even as her eyes go wide over it. Fortunately, Zeke doesn't appear to notice, preoccupied as he is with curling himself into as tightly compact a ball as humanly possible.

Justin isn't paying attention, either. All the colour has drained out of his face, leaving him sickly pale as he goggles at the screen

of her Macbook, and Alex can't help but notice that he hasn't blinked in awhile.

"Justin," she says in a small voice, slowly stepping up off the couch as though making any sudden movements might provoke him. "Look, please don't...I can explain..."

Hearing her say his name seems to finally break the weird trance he's in, because his gaze darts up to her face, then, still not blinking. And man, if she'd thought his eyes had been filled with pain and confusion before...

"Alex," he murmurs, his voice tight, barely loud enough for her to hear. "How could you?"

Alex feels her cheeks burn with second-hand embarrassment. She knows what he's thinking: that she's outed him to Harper and Zeke, and shown them the Jalan stories he's posted as Archimedes. That she's humiliated him by giving away the most closely-guarded secret he holds after the whole wizard thing. It's an awful conclusion for him to jump to, one that speaks volumes about what he thinks of her, and of what he thinks *she thinks* of him.

And given how horrible she's been to him as Heinsteins all weekend, she can't exactly blame him. Not in the least.

"Justin, no!" she says quickly, shaking her head. "Listen to me, I swear it's not what you think!"

"Really," he snarls, and the angry bitterness in his tone is like a slap in the face. "And exactly what am I *supposed* to think you're doing showing our best friends the julia_alan community, Alex?"

"She's helping me," Harper says, before Alex can answer.

Alex and Justin both turn to look up at her, surprised, and even Zeke pulls his head out from beneath his arms to gape at her in shock.

"What?" all three of them say, in the same breath.

"I'm the one posting on the site, Justin, not Alex," Harper says smoothly, even as she cocks one eyebrow ever so slightly at Alex in that *'you owe me for covering for you'* way she has since kindergarten. She walks a few steps down the stairs and leans forward to peer over Justin's shoulder at the Macbook's screen. "I'm the one who's been flirting online with Archimedes. I'm...uh...future_hayley."

"You are?" Justin asks.

"You *are*?" Zeke parrots him, looking crestfallen. And Alex can practically hear the crash and tinkle of his heart shattering into a million tiny pieces.

"Nononononono," she says quickly, shaking her head and waving her hands frantically at her best friend. "Harper, don't. It's really sweet what you're trying to do, here, and any other time I'd *totally* be OK with you taking the fall for me, but—"

"And you're Heinsteins," Justin cuts her off, turning back around to glare at her. "Of course. I'd wondered why you'd bothered to flame me with a sockpuppet account, but I get it now. It was all just another one of your underhanded little schemes to manipulate me into doing what you want, just like it always is. I should have known."

"Justin, wait—"

"And that's been *you* writing back in the margins of the books, hasn't it?" Justin snaps, rounding back on Harper so fast that she actually flinches away. "Imitating Alex's handwriting just like you have on her homework for years."

"Um...maybe?" Harper says, looking at Alex uncertainly.

"Unbelievable," Justin snorts, closing his eyes and lowering his chin to his chest. "No, that's not true. Coming from you this is *entirely* believable, Alex. The only unbelievable thing is the fact that I actually thought you might..."

He trails off, takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. Then, opening his eyes and lifting his head, he reaches out and calmly hands the Macbook back to Alex. Struck speechless for possibly the first time in her life, wanting to say a million things but knowing all of them would probably only make it worse, she accepts it from him in silence, wrapping her arms around it and hugging it to her chest.

"Harper," Justin says, without taking his eyes off Alex. "I don't know what Alex told you, but it's not going to work. You can't trick me into falling for you, no matter who you pretend to be. I love you as much as Alex does, but...not that way."

"Um...kay?" Harper says awkwardly, frowning at Alex in confusion and mouthing the words *'What is he talking about?'*

She quickly closes her mouth and assumes a posture of heartbroken disappointment as Justin finally *does* turn around to look up at her, sadly.

"I'm sorry, Harper," he says. "Sometimes I actually wish I could feel differently about you. I really do. But you can't control who you fall for...no matter how much you wish you *could*."

And with a final, cutting look at Alex, Justin heaves another sigh, then stalks back down the black staircase into the Sub Station, his footsteps ringing heavily on the metal stairs.

"I...uh...should probably go after him," Zeke says, as he gets up off the loveseat and walks past Alex. "He looks like he could use somebody to talk to about all this. Not that I fully understand everything that just happened here, mind you. Or anything, really. But that's kind of standard operating procedure when you hang around the Russos, isn't it?"

"Preach on, brother," Harper says, leaning on the railing above him.

"His sister's a hateful, deceitful bitch," Alex sighs, shaking her head slightly. "That's all you really need to know."

"Well, *duh!*" Zeke says. "Um, no offense."

Alex snorts and smiles at him weakly. "None taken. I had that coming...and a lot more besides."

"Hmm. Normally this is where I'd lay a consoling hand on your shoulder and say *'buck up, dear friend'*, but somehow—"

"Touch me and I'll pound you, Zeke."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Zeke nods. He looks up at Harper and tilts his head to the side slightly, like an inquisitive puppy. "I thought you were finally over Justin, Harper."

Harper blinks and straightens up in surprise. She exchanges a quick glance with Alex, then shrugs faux-nonchalantly even as she blushes beneath her freckles. "Uh...I am."

"Oh. Well, good!" Breaking out into a wide grin, Zeke raises one hand and waves at them stiffly. "Viya con diyos, compadres!"

With that, he turns and heads down into Sub Station after Justin. Harper leans over the railing above, her long red hair dangling as she watches after him.

"What do you think that was about?" Harper asks after he's out of sight, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"I dunno," Alex groans. She tosses the Macbook on the couch, then sits down heavily on the arm, shoulders slumped. "I think it mighta been French...or Italian, maybe..."

"No, I meant—why do I get the feeling that I just screwed things up for you big time, without meaning to?"

"It wasn't your fault, Harper," Alex says, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. "I'm the one who screwed things up, just by being me."

"Justin's not just upset about you flirting with some boy online, is he?" Harper asks, circling around as she comes the rest of the way down the stairs. "You wanna tell me what's really going on here?"

"Not really," Alex admits. Then, off Harper's look of hurt and confusion: "Don't be mad. It's just...I really don't think I could take it if you and Justin both decided to hate me forever in the same weekend."

"Alex Russo." Harper tilts her head to one side and crosses her arms over her chest. "You've never been shy about sharing just about every terrible little thing you've done since kindergarten with me, if only so that I could help you cover it up, and fix things when you screwed up. Heck, you even told me you were a *wizard*...so that I could help you cover it up, and fix things when you screwed up."

"Harper, that isn't the only reason I—"

Harper holds up one hand to cut her off. "Are you honestly telling me that whatever's going on between you and Justin is so much worse that you won't let me help you cover that up, too? Or fix what you've screwed up? Because as an accomplished accomplice, I sort of take offense to that."

Alex allows herself a small smile at that, but it immediately turns itself back into a frown as she shakes her head. "No, I can't. I'm sorry. This is...huge. And weird. And kind of a mess right now."

"Wow, things between you and Justin weird and kind of a mess. How novel." Coming up next to the orange couch, Harper drapes one arm lightly across Alex's shoulders. "Hey c'mon...try me. I don't know if you've noticed the way I dress, but I'm kind of all about eschewing convention. That means I have a pretty open mind, Alex."

Alex looks at her, opens her mouth to tell her once again that she can't tell her...but hesitates. There's a familiar twinkle in Harper's eye, as though she somehow finds all this amusing, which she only gets when Alex is forced to apologize, or to fess up to something she already suspects.

And that's when it occurs to Alex that Future Harper is the one who got her thinking this way in the first place, who made her see what had always been there between her and Justin, just beneath the surface. And there's no way she piled on that much shippy subtext by accident. In the first book, maybe, but five books later? C'mon. Hell, if everyone who *reads* the campfire scene can tell what's *really* going on between Alan and Julia, even those few fans who *don't* ship them, it's because H.J. Darling freaking *wrote* it that way.

The bottom line is that Future Harper knows, and pretty clearly ships it herself. And if Future Harper ships Jalan, then doesn't it make sense that Present Harper ships, or at least *could* ship...um...

(Alectin? Nah, not cute enough. Alestin? Ugh, no. Alustin? Snkt, yeah, that's it. Because they're totally a-lustin' for each other, get it?)

"Well?" Harper prompts her, nudging her shoulder gently.

Alex takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly.

"Just how unconventional are you ready to get?" she asks tentatively. "Because this is pretty goddamned unconventional..."

"I've fashioned an entire jacket out of strips of beef jerky with the express purpose of someday coercing one or more attractive men to eat it off me," Harper says, without embarrassment. She cocks one eyebrow. "You really think you can out-freak me, little girl? Please. Bring it on."

Alex blinks at this, then nods to herself as she makes up her mind.

"OK then, listen," she says in a low voice, glancing over both shoulders to make sure nobody's around to overhear. "I'm not saying anything's happened, that anything's even *gonna* happen, or even that I necessarily *want* anything to happen, but...well, here's the thing: you know that boy I was telling you about?"

Author's Note: Yeah, this is a development that surprised even me. Not the way I expected this chapter to go at all...but then, I think I'd telegraphed what I *had* planned for this chapter a little too neatly, so that it felt predictable and safe. In the long run, I think this works better. I know, I know...everyone's impatient for some schmoopy Jalex to happen already—or Alustin, heh, because Alex would *never* let Justin's name go first—but trust me. We're getting to that, promise. Stay tuned.

Sorry for the long delay between chapters. Work/life balance has been skewed rather heavily in the favor of work of late, leaving me with little or no time to write. I've been pecking away at this chapter in fits and spurts for over a month. There's light at the end of the tunnel, though, so hopefully I'll be able to get back to semi-regular updates again before too long. Thanks for keeping the faith, as well as all your reviews, favorites and alerts. It's very much appreciated.

A gold star to my fellow dorks who manage to get all of the geeky references I managed to work in, thanks to Zeke. He's ridiculously fun to write for.

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 11**

xxi.

Hours later, sitting at the kitchen table, drumming her fingertips against the polished maple, Alex stares out the window, watching the storm. The snow piles up on the terrace, blowing into odd-shaped drifts around the covered barbecue and patio furniture. In the kitchen to her right, the kettle finally stops whistling as Harper takes it off the stove, and pours equal portions of boiling water into the two white ceramic mugs waiting on the counter. This is followed by the unmistakable tinkle of a metal spoon stirring the contents of both, then clattering lightly as it's set back down on the counter. And then finally one of the steaming mugs is set down in front of her, just as Harper retakes her seat across the table, sipping gingerly from her own.

Alex looks down at the cup of instant hot chocolate in front of her, and smiles at the white, gooey mess that fifteen mini-marshmallows make as they melt on the surface, then gratefully wraps her hands around it. It's not that she's cold, exactly, but watching the snowstorm combined with the day's events has left her feeling more than a little chilly on the inside.

"So?" Harper says to break the awkward silence between them, as she sets her own hot chocolate down on the table, without looking up from it.

"So," Alex nods, tilting her mug from side to side and admiring the patterns the marshmallows make as they collide with one another.

Alex lifts her mug to her lips and takes a small sip. Across from her, she senses more than sees Harper doing the same, as the awkward silence settles over them again.

"It's good," Alex says after she swallows, licking marshmallow foam off her top lip. "Better than mom makes it, even. I like how you mix in coffee creamer, instead of—"

"Alex, it's not that I don't get it," Harper blurts out abruptly, cutting her off. "Really, I do. Nobody understands better than I do what an irresistible piece of man-candy Justin is..."

Alex snorts, then winces and brings one hand up to her nose as hot cocoa threatens to spew out of it.

"...but...I mean, is this sort of thing *normal* in the Wizard World, or what? Because here, in the *real* world? It kind of makes you complete freaks of nature. No offense."

Alex can't help but smile at this, one of the most popular theories in Jalan-centric fics given voice by her bewildered best friend. As far as plot devices to make the ship socially acceptable go, *'it's perfectly normal in the Wizard World'* is right up there next to *'OMG, somebody's adopted!'* But she shakes her head.

"Nah," she explains. "At least not anymore. Justin did look into it—because he's, y'know, Justin—but came up with bupkis. He says that it *used* to be pretty common for brothers and sisters to...y'know...back in the olden days when magic was wild, and there were wars between wizard families. It was important to keep the bloodlines pure, and stuff."

"Like with European royalty, or the Egyptian emperors," Harper says.

Alex shrugs. "Sure, if you say so. But that was all, like, a gazillion years ago. It's kinda frowned on, now. I dunno if there's any actual laws against it—Justin didn't mention finding any, and *I* sure as hell haven't bothered to look—but nobody even really talks about it anymore. It's like they're embarrassed by the whole thing, or they want to sweep it under the rug, or whatever. And you know how the Wizards Council are total Nazis when it comes to P.R."

She rolls her eyes and snorts as she takes another sip of hot chocolate. "So, yeah...even in the Wizard World, we'd be complete freaks of nature, if you can believe it. I mean, nobody would think *twice* about Justin marrying that centaur chick he met on WizFace, but me? Squick city. Go figure, huh?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Harper frowns, and to Alex's surprise, she sounds genuinely disappointed for her.

Alex shrugs, and goes back to stirring her marshmallows. "Whatever. It is what it is."

"And Justin told you all this? I thought you guys weren't talking."

"Not exactly. It was somewhere in the margins of...Book Three, I wanna say? Or Four, I'm not sure. I'd have to look it up, and who has the patience for that?"

"Oh," Harper says quietly over the rim of her mug, then smiles chuckles to herself.

"What?" Alex asks, narrowing her eyes at her best friend. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing," Harper grins, waving one hand dismissively. "It's just...I think that's the first piece of actual wizard history you've ever bothered to commit to memory without there being a test involved. And even then—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Alex grunts, tilting her chair back on two legs and looking back out towards the terrace. "So it was relevant to my interests, OK? Sue me."

"And to Justin's," Harper observes quietly. "I mean, it seems like he's put an awful lot of thought into all this."

"Oh God, you don't know the half of it, Harper," Alex sighs as she watches the snow fall. "Twenty-five thousand freakin' words! And that's only the one fic I was allowed to read! There's at least a *half dozen* more like it out there that he hasn't even let me see! Ugh."

"That's *definitely* an awful lot of thought," Harper nods.

"You're telling me. Even if you strung every single essay, research project and book report I've ever written in my entire life together, end to end, I *still* don't think they'd add up to twenty-five thousand freakin' words!"

"That's because *I* write all those for you, Alex..."

"And that other one I read, the drabble?" Alex continues, ignoring her. "Sweet Zombie Jesus, Harper. He managed to say so much with *exactly* a hundred words. It was...I mean, it must have taken him...I can't imagine putting *that* much effort into..."

She trails off and exhales shakily, reaching up oh-so-subtly to wipe the corner of her left eye. Just because the steam from the hot chocolate was irritating it. Totally.

"That sounds like it could be a little overwhelming," Harper says, "even if it wasn't coming from your own flesh and blood."

"Sister, you ain't just whistlin' Dixie," Alex replies in a low voice, then winces again and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Oh God, would you listen to me? I sound like Mister Laritate. As if my life weren't screwed up enough!"

"It's the *good* kind of overwhelming, though, isn't it?" Harper asks, with a wistful smile. "The kind that makes you all light-headed and giggly and short of breath...like Roxane standing on the balcony, being wooed by Cyrano's love poetry as he lays hidden in the rose bushes..."

"Uh, are these seniors you're talking about here, or something? Because the only Roxanne in our grade is De Fazio, and lemme tell ya, if *anyone* should be hiding in the bushes..."

Harper doesn't say anything in response, but tilts her head to one side and gives her The Look, causing Alex to trail off and shrug sheepishly.

"It...feels really nice, yeah," she admits, in a small voice. "All kinds of awesome, actually...but really scary at the same time, y'know? I just...I kind of don't know what to *do* with it, Harper."

"Hence, all the panicking and reflexive bitchiness," Harper sighs. "Well, I guess nobody could exactly *blame* you."

"Nobody but a few thousand crazy Jalan shippers," Alex snorts. "If they knew what I'd put Justin through this weekend, they'd come after me old school. Y'know, the whole 'angry mob armed with torches and/or pitchforks' kinda deal? Except they'd probably all tweet about it as they burned the Sub Station down around me. Hashtag 'DieHatefulBitchDie'. Snkt, I'll bet it would even *trend*..."

"There's really that many? Seriously?"

"It's the only book series with its very own Incest Yay page on TV Tropes," Alex nods. "Or at least it was, until TV Tropes got all boring and prudish. It's like suddenly they're all up with Jesus, or something. Or maybe Disney just cut them a deal, or threatened to sue, I dunno...but whatever, it's still the fan-preferred ship. And *now* I sound just like Justin and Zeke whenever they start going off about Han Solo shooting first in Star Wars and *holy crap how did my life come to this, Harper?*"

"*That* just completely boggles my mind," Harper says, shaking her head. "Uh, I mean that there are so many Jalan shippers out there, not the bit about you. Why aren't more people completely disgusted by the idea?"

"Why aren't we completely disgusted by the idea? Why are we sitting here talking calmly about it over hot cocoa instead of taking turns puking our guts out into the snow over how unbelievably freakin' gross this is? For Christ's sake, I'm seriously considering dating my—"

Harper's chin comes up sharply at this, eyes wide, and Alex breaks off so abruptly that her teeth actually click as she closes her mouth.

"Um," she says awkwardly, after a second. "Can I move to have that last comment stricken from the record?"

"Do you *see* a stenographer sitting in your living room?" Harper says wryly. Then, off Alex's blank look: "That's what they *call* those little old court reporter ladies with the freaky typewriter things on *Law & Order*, see."

"Ah," Alex says, smiling sheepishly. "Hoisted by my own retard, huh?"

"No, Alex, it's—forget it." Harper lets out a long-suffering sigh, and shakes her head. "Look, trust me: I am *thisclose* to screaming '*See you in P.E.*' and running out of here as fast as my fashionable yet sensibly-priced chunky heels will allow me. But, frighteningly enough, you and Justin being...whatever it is you are...is *not* the freakiest thing I've had to deal with since I've started living here."

"No?" Alex asks, in a small, hopeful voice.

"Far from it, in fact. It actually kind of pales in comparison to the whole '*running for my life from relentless Monster Hunters*' thing you put me through, for one," Harper says pointedly, then shrugs. "Besides, in a weird way, I think I've kind of always...known?"

Alex blinks at this, then narrows her eyes. "Known *what*?"

Harper shrugs again, then turns to look out the window at the snow herself, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. Alex leans forward on the edge of her chair, determined to calmly wait, and give her the moment she needs to gather her thoughts. But when that moment drags out into two, she huffs impatiently and kicks her under the table.

"Harper, c'mon! Known *what* exactly?"

Harper's entire body jolts as Alex startles her out of whatever reverie she was lost in, then turns back to face her. And the bottom drops out of Alex's stomach as she realizes the redhead's eyes are red-rimmed, and misted over with tears.

"That Justin would never look at me the way he looks at you," Harper says, with a vaguely syrupy undertone in her voice. "That his life could never revolve around me the way it does around you."

Harper snuffles, grimaces as if annoyed by it, then reaches up to angrily wipe her nose.

"You're his everything, Alex," she continues. "You always have been, and you always will be. Miranda, Juliet, me...none of us ever stood a chance next to you."

"Harper..." Alex murmurs, feeling her own eyes beginning to sting.

Harper shakes her head sharply, and raises one finger as if to forestall her, even as a tear begins to roll down her cheek.

"And then there was that time I was stuck in your head with you, on Family Game Night, remember? And we were fighting for control of your body, and I got all flirty with Justin? You weren't fighting me very hard when that happened, Alex..."

"I—" Alex sits bolt upright, taken aback by this sudden violation of their unspoken pact never to speak of that night again. "That's only 'cause I'm lazy..."

"Not when it comes to getting your way, you're not," Harper snorts. "You put up a token resistance, sure...but even then, it felt to me like you wanted it to happen. You *wanted* me to make you flirt with him. And you would have let it go even further, if I'd—"

"OK, now *I'm* on the verge of screaming '*See you in P.E.*!'" Alex cuts her off, wincing and shaking her head sharply. "Stop being gross!"

"But that's just it, Alex! It's *not* gross! It *should* be, but it's not!" Harper tilts her head to one side, her eyes going soft at the corners. "It's actually kind of...sweet, in way. Romantic. Starcrossed lovers, burning for each other with a secret, forbidden passion..."

"Ugh, Harper..." Alex groans, pushing her chair away from the table and stumbling up out of it, needing to get away. It's not that Harper's wrong, exactly, but the truth of it is all too much, too fast. It's one thing for Justin to muse about these things in the margins of books, or for her to lie awake and go over them in her head in the dead of night...but to hear them out loud like this, coming from the mouth of her best friend, makes it tangibly, frighteningly *real* somehow...and it scares the everloving crap out of her.

Alex takes two steps away from the table, but stops in her tracks as she catches sight of her MacBook. Open on the coffee table, displaying the hastily captured, low-quality cell phone photo of the painting she'd done in art class weeks ago. The one she'd called 'Forbidden Flame'.

Alex inhales deeply, and lets it out in one long, shuddering breath. Christ almighty, when the hell did her life become such a goddamned soap opera?

"Justin writes epic, painstakingly detailed romantic prose. You express yourself in other ways," Harper observes quietly, watching her. "That painting you did, it's of that exact same moment he wrote about, isn't it?"

Without taking her eyes off it, Alex nods. "The campfire scene. It's when *I* knew, that there was something *more* between Justin and me. That we weren't just..."

She trails off, finding it difficult to find the words, to form them around the twin golf balls that have suddenly taken up residence on either side of her throat, making it hard to breathe. And she's as much grateful as she is surprised when Harper comes up beside her, wraps one arm tightly around her shoulders, and tilts her head against Alex's.

"And I guarantee you it says just as much as Justin's stories, without saying anything at all," Harper says, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "It's beautiful."

Alex breaks out into a wide grin, flushed with pride at the compliment despite herself. "Really?"

Harper nods lightly. "Easily the best thing I've ever seen you do. *Much* better than all those lonely little wolf paintings you've hidden in the corner of my room..."

"Hey! It was a phase, all right? If Chegal can have a blue period—"

"I know, Alex," Harper says soothingly. "And I still think our plan's a good one. You should definitely show it to him. He *has* to see it."

"But he thinks I'm *you*, now!" Alex whines, stomping her heel in frustration. "If we post this on julia_alan using my future_haley account, he's just gonna think *you* painted it!"

"Honey, *nobody* who really knows you is gonna think *I* painted that," Harper says. "Especially not Justin. Not when there's so much of *you* in it."

"Then he'll think I painted it *for* you!" Alex protests, shaking her head furiously. "Paying you back for years of doing my homework. And years. And *years*..."

"Then maybe it's time that you came out of the rose bushes, there, Cyrano," Harper chuckles, "and show Justin that how you feel about him is as plain as the nose on your face."

"All right, who the hell is this Cyrano dude you keep going on about? And what's with the crack about my nose?" Alex reaches up to prod it self-consciously. "Look, I can't help it that I'm half-latina, OK? That's racist, Harper."

Harper blinks in surprise, then tilts her head to one side to give her The Look again. Alex rolls her eyes, and sighs.

"And what about you?" she asks, still gingerly poking her nose. "Are you sure you're gonna be OK with this? I mean, you've been in love with Justin almost as long as...well, y'know..."

"I'll be fine," Harper says, giving her a tight smile. "I wasn't lying when I told Zeke that I was over him. This whole thing just dredged up some old feelings I never put into words before, that's all."

"Yeah, join the club," Alex snorts. "I'm president. You can be secretary."

"Besides," Harper smiles, "in the books, Hayley winds up with Zack, doesn't she?"

"Yeeeeeah," Alex nods, almost reluctantly. "Although there's a very small but devoted and outspoken fan movement that supports

pairing her with Sam..."

"What? Me and Max? Seriously?" Harper cocks an eyebrow at Alex as though she's just noticed sweet potatoes growing out of her ears, then shakes her head and grins. "No, I think I definitely ship Zayley, myself."

"Uh-huh, you would," Alex sighs, fighting the urge to roll her eyes again. Oh well, so much for making her personal head-canon into reality. At least she could tell her fellow Sayley-ers she'd taken a stab at it. "All right, so what do you say? Still post it?"

"Oh, definitely!" Harper says cheerfully, then narrows her eyes and smirks deviously at the painting displayed on the Macbook. "But that's not *all* you're gonna do..."

Author's Note: I actually hadn't intended to write this scene. In fact, I sort of took it for granted that Harper would be in Alex's corner, just like she has been through everything else over the years, so I'd actually intended for this whole conversation to happen "off screen", as it were. Enough people wrote in to say that they couldn't wait to see Harper's reaction, though, that I realized that I had to give the moment its due, and I'm actually really happy with how it turned out. It wasn't planned, but I really dig how the story's evolved on its own (with your help), so that Alex's friendship with Harper is almost as central as her relationship with Justin is. (Which only makes sense, given that she's eventually going to be the one who writes *Charmed & Dangerous*.)

Unfortunately, though, this meant putting off the Jalex-y fanservice I've been promising for one more chapter. But fear not! As Harper alludes to at the end of this one, it is *definitely* in the cards for the next one, promise! And then the next chapter or two after *that* is going to be fairly schmoopy before the next big complication (which I may have kinda sorta foreshadowed a little in this chapter) rears its head. (What? You didn't think it was gonna be *all* smooth sailing from here, didja?)

Anyway, thanks again for all your kind feedback. As you can see, it's helping to make for a better story. And as always, thanks also for the favorites and alerts. They're very much appreciated, as is your patience with the erratic update schedule of late. Work *finally* ought to calm down a little after this week, so hopefully the next update will be up sooner rather than later.

Oh, and for the record? I happen to *like* Selena's nose... :P

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Author's Note: My sincere apologies for the long delay between updates. As you'll see, though, this one is pretty important, and I wanted to make sure I got it just right. Hopefully this sets things back on course for those of you who feel the story had lost its way for the past couple chapters. (It also contains more than a little bit of blatant fanservice, which is always fun.)

Your reviews, favorites, alerts and recs during the overly long hiatus have been appreciated more than you'll ever know. Thanks for keeping the faith. I can't guarantee in good faith that we'll be returning to the once-a-week updates of yore, but *OTP* is far from abandoned, promise. I know how it ends, I'm excited about how it ends, and I can't wait to share it with the rest of you. Until then, stay tuned. I'll update as often as time and life will allow.

Much love to all and sundry,
SvM

xxii.

The air against the skin of Alex's bare arms is warm and stickily humid, a nice change from the winter storm that's currently dumping three feet of snow on Waverly Place. The humidity of the rainforest threatens to do a number on her hair—already Harper looks like the bride of Bigfoot, after just under 45 minutes—but hey, that's what they make magic *for*, right?

Somewhere over to the left of the moonlit clearing, a twig or something snaps in the darkness, making Harper stand bolt upright from where she'd been crouched over the pile of sticks she's been carefully arranging into a campfire, according to the *Girl Scouts of America Handbook*. Alex fights the urge to roll her eyes as she sets *Forbidden Flame* down on the easel she flashed in from her room to display it.

"Did...did you hear that?" Harper asks, her voice all trembly and high-pitched and Harper-ish. "You don't think it was a rabid mongoose, do you?"

"Harper, would you calm down?" Alex sighs. "Yes, I get that the guide said the most dangerous land animal in Puerto Rico is the rabid mongoose. It didn't say they were hiding behind every bush, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting redheads."

"But it didn't specify they *weren't*, either, did it?" Harper says, still looking around uneasily. "Stupid Fromer's..."

(This time Alex really does roll her eyes. God, why does Harper always insist on skimming travel books before letting her flash them anywhere? Sure, there'd been the one incident with giant fire ants that time in Africa, but the swelling and nausea had totally cleared themselves up after just a couple days. Besides, what's the point of carrying an Epi-pen on you at all times if you're not gonna live dangerously every once in a while?)

"Harper, you saw me cast the ward against wild animals," Alex reminds her, holding up her wand for emphasis. "It was the first thing I did when we got here. Relax, OK?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, Alex, but I've seen you cast a *lot* of spells," Harper says, as her eyes darting nervously around the clearing. "They don't always work out the way you expect them to."

"I cast exactly the same one that Justin used, the last time we were here," Alex says flatly. "Word for word."

"Oh?" Harper turns to smile at her, all the tension seeming to go out of her body at once. "Well, that's different, then. Why didn't you say so in the first—"

"LOOKOUT, MONGOOSE!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

Screaming at the top of her lungs, Harper throws herself bodily to the ground, and starts rolling back and forth on the floor of the jungle as though she's on fire. It takes a few minutes before Alex's laughter penetrates through her panic enough that she stops.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Alex chortles, doubled over, one hand pressed to her stomach as she points at Harper with the other.

"That wasn't funny," Harper growls through grit teeth as she pushes herself up off the ground, and brushes the grass and mud off the front of her skirt.

"You didn't see it from where I'm standing," Alex snickers. She straightens up, puts her hands on her hips, and tilts her head to one side. "By the way, '*stop, drop, and roll*'? Probably not the most effective defense against mongeese. I'm just sayin'..."

"You're nervous," Harper observes, with a coy smile.

Alex's mirth cuts off abruptly as she blinks at her. "What? No I'm not!"

"Yes you are," Harper says plainly, cutting through Alex's bullshit as only she can. "You only ever prank me like that when you're desperate to distract yourself, and there aren't any other available targets. I know a last resort when I see it, Alex."

"Yeah, well...you still deserved it," Alex pouts. "Just 'cause the spell came from Justin instead of me, doesn't mean it's right...necessarily."

"Well, I think I just scared off every living thing within a twenty-mile radius, so you're probably in the clear either way." Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Harper turns around in a circle, her smile widening as she takes in the clearing around her. "Perfect. Just the way I've always pictured it...with the shelter over *there*, and Alan and Julia sitting all snugly by the the campfire over *here*..."

"Yeah, it's pretty close," Alex nods, then looks down at herself and grimaces. "This outfit sure fit a lot better a year ago than it does now, though. I think I've filled out a bit, since. You think it's too tight?"

"Nonono, it's perfect!" Harper grins. "Trust me. He'll love it."

"Pfft, he'd better. If mom and dad find out we broke curfew for this, it's my ass." Alex runs her hand back through her hair as she takes a last look around. "OK, I think that's everything. I should probably send you back before they notice we're *both* gone."

"Ooo, hang on! Lemme just get the campfire started, first!" Harper says, crouching back down over it. "It should only take me a few minutes of blowing on it to get it going. I was always the fastest at it in my Brownie troupe. My mom said it's on account of me having such big lungs..."

Alex cocks an eyebrow at her, then reaches towards the expertly-arranged pile of twigs and snaps her fingers. Harper makes a sound somewhere between a gasp and a squawk and drops backwards onto her behind as it bursts into flame before her.

"Wizard lesson number one is learning how to light candles with your brain," Alex says by way of explanation, after Harper looks up at her in askance. "It took Justin a whole week to figure it out. *I* did it on the first try. Ha."

Harper frowns at her as she stands back up and brushes herself off again. "Was that the week in grade five when you and Justin came to school with your eyebrows pencilled in until the real ones grew back in?"

"No, not at all," Alex says defensively, raising her wand again. "It was...in...sixth grade. Look, are you ready to go back? Because I kind of want to get this over with, already."

"Ohhhhh Alex, can't I stay?" Beaming like a proud stage mother, Harper clasps her hands together in front of her chest, and begins bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "Please? I know I made you promise never to use magic on me, even if I asked, but you can turn me invisible and I'll be oh so quiet...!"

"Ungh, Harper..." Alex winces, then reaches up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Listen, I know you went to a lot of trouble to help me set this up, and I totally appreciate it, but...this is gonna be weird enough *without* an audience, y'know what I'm saying?"

"Awww, but Alex...!"

"Harper, gimme a break, huh? You know how much I hate saying...those words...in front of other people!"

"Those words?" Harper blinks at her in open-mouthed shock. "Woah, you mean...you're actually gonna tell Justin that you...that you're in lo—"

"*No*, not *those* words!" Alex snaps, taking a step forward to backhand her best friend lightly in the shoulder. "Ugh! What are you, crazy? No! I mean the other 'those words' that I hate saying to people! Particularly Justin!"

Harper closes her mouth, stares at her blankly, then shakes her head a little. Alex lets out a groan and drops her head backwards, looking up at the moon in exasperation.

"Um, hello? They rhyme with '*I'm Laurie*'?"

"Oh!" Harper blurts out, clearly surprised. "Well...it's not exactly the romantic roundezvous I had pictured, but still a pretty big step forward in your relationship! I'm proud of you, Alex!"

"Gee, thanks Mom," Alex snarks, then immediately winces at how wrong that sounds, given the context of the situation. "Look, I promise I'll tell you all about it after we get back, OK?"

"Everything?" Harper asks, eyebrows raised, as she points at her. "You promise, a full report? Even if there's smooching?"

"Oh, holy rollerblading mother of God! There is not gonna be smooching! Baby steps, Harper, baby steps! We talked about this!"

"I know, I know," Harper says, patting the air defensively. "But all I'm saying is, if you feel a smoochable moment coming on, don't hesitate. Just go with it."

"I am sending you back now," Alex says firmly through grit teeth. She raises her wand again, the tip already beginning to glow.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Harper says, throwing her hands out at her. "Zap Justin in first, then zap me out like a split-second later. I just wanna see the look on his face when he realizes where he is before you send me home. You owe me at least that much!"

Alex's shoulders slump a little. Can't really argue with that, can she? "Ugh, fine...but you're a royal pain in my ass, Finkle. I want you to know this."

"I know. I love you too," Harper grins. She lurches forward, so suddenly that Alex actually flinches, enveloping her in a tight hug and planting a kiss on her cheek. "Good luck. I'm rooting for you."

Alex blinks at the sudden, watery stinging that leaps to her eyes. Smiling despite herself, she wraps her arms around Harper and squeezes just as tightly.

"I know," she says quietly, around the uncharacteristic lump that's formed in her throat. "You're amazing. Thank you."

"Wow, two more words you normally hate saying to people! It's a big night for you!" Grinning at her own joke, Harper releases her and takes a few steps back. She smooths out the front of her skirt, then nods. "OK, ready."

Alex nods back, takes a deep breath in an attempt to quiet the killer mutant dire moths that have taken up residence in the pit of her stomach, and swings her wand in a tight circle above her head. In response, a bright flash erupts in the middle of the clearing...

...and then suddenly Justin is standing there, to the left of the makeshift shelter, shirtless and barefoot, wearing only a pair of flannel pajama bottoms. Hunched over at the waist, with his toothbrush in his mouth and a cup of water in his left hand, he spits a mouthful of toothpaste foam out onto the long grass at his feet. Then, blinking rapidly as he realizes what he's looking at, he stands stiffly upright and starts cocking his head from one side to the other, like an inquisitive bird.

"A-rex..?" he says uncertainly around his toothbrush.

"Ohmigosh!" Harper half-gasps, half-squeals, as she takes in how Justin is (un)dressed. "Oh, there had *better* be some smooching in your report later!"

Scowling, Alex flicks her wand at the redhead, sending her back to the loft on Waverly Place without so much as a goodbye. Justin catches the flash out of the corner of his eye and turns towards her, just as Harper disappears, his eyes blazing in the flickering light on the fire.

"A-rex! Wha oo yoo thig yoor—!"

He breaks off suddenly, holds up one finger at her, then removes the toothbrush from his mouth and brings the cup of water to his lips. Alex rolls her eyes and crosses her arms beneath her breasts as he rinses and gargles. Then, ever the gentleman, he turns away to spit gingerly onto the ground, as though seeing him do so might offend her delicate sensibilities.

"You all done there, Sparky?" she asks, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Or should I just stand here and wait for you to floss, too? Because it's not like I have anything better to do..."

"Don't you get snarky with *me*," Justin snaps at her, brandishing his toothbrush at her menacingly. "You're the one who flashed me here against my will, ten minutes before my self-imposed bedtime! Which is a major breach of wizard etiquette, I might add..."

"Ooo, no! Not wizard etiquette!" Alex faux-gasps. "Heavens to Betsy, I sure hope Miss Manners never finds out! Oh wait, she's

standing right here in front of me."

"Har-dee-har-har," Justin shot back lamely. "If Emily Post ever did have the misfortune of running into you, I guarantee she'd take one look at you, then run off in the other direction, screaming '*Burn the heretic! Burn the heretic!*'"

"Oh yeah? Well, if she ever saw *you*, she'd..." Alex trails off mid-insult. Partly because she has no idea who Emily Post is, or what she might actually do in Justin's presence, but mostly because she's starting to feel as though the whole '*make up with Justin*' thing isn't exactly starting off on the right foot, here. "Look, forget it. Aren't you the least bit curious to know why I brought you here, doofus?"

(Ugh. So that? Not exactly the right foot, either. Christ, why does everything that comes out of her mouth sound so bitchy when he's around, even when she doesn't mean it to be? And why has she never noticed it before?)

"I couldn't possibly care any less, *Heinstein*," Justin says pointedly. "I just want you to send me back, already. Where the hell is here, anyway? What are we doing standing out here in the middle of the—?"

Justin stands stock still for a moment as his enormous brain finally catches up with the rest of him, and he finally registers where he is. Dropping his hands to his sides—and spilling out the contents of his cup in the process—he frowns as he slowly turns his head from side to side, taking in the campfire, the makeshift palm-frond shelter beyond it, and finally Alex herself. He blinks in recognition as he gets his first really good look at her outfit: the exact same red-orange top, denim shorts and white boots that she'd worn when they'd sat by the fire together in this clearing a year ago. His eyes travel down, then back up, lingering ever so slightly on the graffiti-esque butterfly design splashed across her chest. (Or, um, maybe just her chest?)

"Rainforest," he croaks out finally, swallowing hard, as his eyes finally meet her gaze. "Wait, Alex...what is this?"

"What do think, egghead?" Alex snorts. "I'm trying to recreate a moment here. *Duh*."

(Gah! And again, cue the hateful bitch. Why does this happen every time they talk to each other? Even when she doesn't mean it to?)

Justin blinks at her, then shakes his head sharply, as though trying to jar something loose. "What? Why? Why on earth would you —?"

"*Justin*," Alex cuts him off, with a roll of her eyes, unable to help herself. Then, before he can say anything else, she turns away from his look of utter confusion, and sits down in front of the fire, indian-style, exactly where she sat a year ago. It takes a moment of her watching it flicker and crackle in front of her before he lets out a heavy sigh and follows her lead, sitting down to the right of her, so close that their knees are almost touching.

"Isn't it supposed to be Harper I'm sitting here with?" he snorts, his voice practically crackling with bitterness. "Or are you actually Harper impersonating Alex again, but in the flesh this time?"

"Justin, don't be ridiculous. You just saw me flash you in. Could Harper have done that?"

"I also could've sworn I just saw someone flash out," Justin says, glaring at her. "And you'll forgive me if recent events have left me feeling more than a little suspicious."

Alex lets out a breath as she closes her eyes, and lowers her chin to her chest, inwardly counting to ten the way their mom does sometimes, to keep her temper from getting the better of her. Except, y'know, not in Spanish.

(And OK, so he might also have a teeny, tiny point, there. Y'know, maybe.)

"That was me sending Harper home, Justin. She was here, yes, but just to help me set all this up." Alex swings her arm around her carelessly, in a gesture that encompasses the clearing and everything in it. "You think I have any clue what a proper lean-to is supposed to look like?"

"Funny, that's exactly what Harper-disguised-as-Alex would probably say," Justin says.

"Justin..." Without looking away from the fire, Alex shakes her head. "Look, I get that you're mad because you think we played you. And you might have every right to be. Y'know, maybe."

"*Maybe?*"

"But that was all a mistake, OK? Harper thought she was covering for me, like she always does. She didn't mean to...I mean, I didn't mean for her to..."

Alex trails off and glances at him, trying to get a read on his expression. The fire casts flicking shadows across his features as he glares into it, jaw clenched.

"Listen, what I'm trying to say here, if I'm trying to say anything," she continues, in a smaller voice than usual, "is that I'm really, really...y'know...*rhymes with Laurie*?"

Justin finally turns his head to look at her, wearing a confused frown. "*Rhymes With Laurie*? Who the hell is that? I thought you were *Heinstein*!"

"What? No, it's not a user name, you idiot! I am trying to—ugh!" Alex huffs impatiently, scrubs her hands over her face, and tries again. "All right, look: yes, I'm *Heinstein*, the troll who took a steaming dump all over your story. I'll admit it, that was all me, my bad. But before that, I was *future_haley*. You get me?"

Justin cocks an eyebrow at this. "And...what? Then Harper took over once you told her what was going on, and you came up with your whole insane plot to make me fall in love with her, instead?"

"No! There *is* no insane plot, you overthinking dork! There never was! *future_haley* was *always* me! I even chose that name on purpose so you'd *know* it was! Harper only told you it was her because she didn't think I'd want you to know!"

Justin's frown deepens. "But...wait, why not?"

"Because, she thought...and I couldn't tell her what was really...look, I dunno, the logic kinda falls apart after that! Who cares?" Alex waves one hand dismissively. "The point is, mistakes were made, your feelings got hurt, and it's all my fault, as usual. Because Alan's sister is a hateful bitch. But look it from *my* point of view for once, OK? Do you have *any* idea how confusing the past few months have been for me?"

"I don't..."

Justin trails off, whatever flippant thing he's about to hurl at her dying on his tongue in the process. He studies her silently for a moment, long enough that she has to fight the urge to squirm uncomfortably under his scrutiny. Gradually, his expression softens a little, and his lips even turn up a bit at the corners.

"Yeah, OK. I guess I get that," he admits softly, then chuckles. "Been there, done that, have the limited edition commemorative T-shirt."

Alex frowns, confused. "T-shirt? The hell? What are you—?"

"I'm saying that I know more than a little bit about what that's like," Justin says. "I've been...dealing with this...a lot longer than you have."

"Yeah," Alex sighs quietly. "I know."

Justin's cheeks darken a little in the flickering light of the campfire. He clears his throat uncomfortably as he drops his eyes to the ground, and starts fiddling with the blades of grass poking up between his feet.

"Right, my annotations," he mutters. "You read my annotations. All of them. You know exactly what I was thinking, and feeling, and...and all of that stuff. And I guess that's why I took it so hard when I thought you were...um..."

"Jerking you around?" Alex supplies.

Justin makes a noise that's half-chuckle, half-snort. "Not exactly how I would have put it, but if the jerk fits..."

He trails off again, and shrugs his bare shoulders ever so slightly.

"But I still may have overreacted, just a tad," he says. "And, for that, I'm truly, genuinely s—"

"Oh, no! No, you don't!" Alex jabs a finger at him, as he looks up at her in surprise.

"Alex? I'm just trying to say I'm sor—"

"No! Nonono! You don't get to be better than me at *this*, too, egghead. *I'm* the one doing the apologizing, here. So you can just take your 'sorry' and your stupid little contrite smile, and shove them both right up your bunghole! You got me?"

Justin sits fully upright, eyes shining as he smiles at her in amusement.

"Um, all right, then," he says. "I apologize for my apology?"

"Ngh!" Alex grunts, shoulders sagging as she hangs her head. Yeah, so this is going well. She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. Then, without another word, she jumps up off the ground and storms over towards the easel that she set up to the left of the campfire. Snatching her painting off of it, she stomps her way back to Justin, and shoves it roughly into his hands.

"Here," she growls. "I made this for you."

"Er...thank you, I think," Justin says, as she plops herself back down next to him. He twists away from her at the waist, angling the canvas towards the firelight, so he can get a better look at it. "Oh. Oh, wow. Is this—this is the same painting you posted on the *julia_alan* comm?"

Alex shrugs sullenly.

"Maybe," she grunts, even though it quite obviously is. (But whatever, it was a stupid question anyway.)

"It's amazing," Justin says as he holds it out at arms length and looks it over. "I mean it, Alex. It's beautiful. It's getting rave reviews on the comm, too, but that grainy cell phone photo you posted doesn't even begin to do it justice."

"Really?" Alex asks. She's glad he's turned away from her, so that he doesn't see the way she flushes all over with pride as she says it.

"Oh, absolutely!" Justin nods. He looks back at her over his shoulder, and she quickly drops her head down so that her hair hides her face. "Y'know, the Comp Sci lab at school has a large-bed scanner that I think this would just fit on. Would you be OK with me posting a better version? I really think it deserves to be seen in HQ."

Concealing her smile behind her hair, Alex shrugs again. "Sure, I guess. Knock yourself out."

"Thank you," Justin says, sounding genuinely grateful, which only makes her smile even wider. "You know, if you'd only use the *Wacom* I got you for Christmas, you could digitally produce art that would look *just*this awesome, but in half the time. And it would be so much easier to share it online."

Alex says nothing in response, but reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ear so that he can see the skeptical look she shoots him. Because whatever "art"—and yes, the air quotes are totally necessary—she managed to crank out with that stupid piece of crap tablet he gave her? She'd sure as hell never want to show it to anybody. Not unless she wanted them to think she was a retarded three year-old on a week-long tequila bender.

"Look," Justin smiles in response, as if reading her thoughts, the way he tends to do, "I know the learning curve is pretty steep, but if you're really having trouble, I'd be more than happy to help—"

"Yeah, so you were saying something about how awesome my painting is?" Alex cuts him off, setting the conversation back on track before he can completely derail it.

Justin blinks at her, then smiles again as he looks back at the painting. And the way he beams and nods emphatically threatens to make her grin again, this time completely out in the open. But what the hell, it's not like he's looking right at her or anything, right?

"It really is, Alex," he says. "I can't even begin to tell you. I've never had anyone do fan art inspired by one of my fics before. Wow."

(Now her grin falters a little. Because whoops, mistaken impression much? And OK, while it probably wouldn't hurt for him to go on believing that—could really only help things, as a matter of fact—the whole point of this little pow-wow of theirs is for her to turn over a new leaf, or come clean, or whatever. So...)

"Um, actually," she says as she looks up, with a bit of a wince, "I kinda sorta painted this before I read *Firelight*, to be honest. Like, way before."

"Oh," Justin says, even as the color rises in his cheeks a little. "Sorry, I didn't mean to just assume. I just thought, because of the timing of you posting it, or whatever—"

"Nonono, don't get me wrong," Alex hastens to add. "I mean, your story did inspire me...um, to post it to the comm, anyway. And I thought it was awesome how you managed to say so much with just a hundred words, when it took me a whole freakin' painting..."

"Heh," Justin chuckles. Then, off Alex's look of askance: "Oh, it's just funny. I was going to say amazed I am at how effortlessly you managed to capture in a single image everything I struggled to say in one hundred words, and then some."

She flushes all over again, and the corners of her mouth twitch upward, but Alex covers with a sardonic snort...

"Well, *duh*. Hello, picture? Thousand words? My painting's worth, like, a hundred of your dopey little dribbles."

"*Drabbles*," Justin corrects her. "And, um, no. By that logic, your painting would actually only be worth ten of them."

"Pfft, whatever!" Alex scoffs. "Somebody's sure full of himself."

"*Nooooo*, somebody just knows how to do basic multiplication," Justin says, in his overly patient *'my sister is an idiot'* voice. Shaking his head, he holds the painting out in front of him again. "It really *is* something, Alex. Much better than all those pieces of wolves standing alone on a cliff, howling at the moon, that you've stashed in the basement."

"Oh, for the love of—" Flushing even deeper than before, Alex crosses her arms over her chest. "Look, for the last time, it was a frickin' phase, OK? If Chegal can have a blue period—"

"I understand," Justin says, without taking his eyes off the painting. "Trust me. You should see how many terrible, angsty *'heartbroken Alan'* one-shots I wrote after that night."

"Seriously," Alex says, so surprised that it comes out sounding more like a statement than a question.

"Sure. Mine are just friend-locked on my LiveJournal instead of hidden away behind the old home gym. Same difference." He turns his face slightly towards hers to smirk at her sheepishly, then shrugs one bare shoulder. "Either way, I'm glad to see you're finally over it."

Rearing back a little and tilting her head to one side, Alex returns the smirk. "That makes two of us."

They sit there smiling sappily at each other for the space of several heartbeats, the only sound between them the crackling of the campfire. And for that moment, it really does feel like just that night a year ago, except that the all-encompassing dread twisting in the pit of her stomach has been replaced by...something else. Something no less twisty, and still just as scary, but in a way that makes her feel energized. Excited. *Alive*. Without meaning to, Alex finds her gaze sliding down Justin's face, from his sparkling grey-green eyes to his lips...

("Alan is too uptight not to think about consequences," Jlnpedia had said. "Anything that would be started there, would have to be started by Julia, because he'd never let himself cross that line.")

And then, just as she feels herself about to lean towards him, Justin breaks the spell by looking away. Glancing first at the painting in his hands, then at the easel set up off to the left, he shifts forward as if to stand up. Alex huffs impatiently and rolls her eyes. Snatching her wand out of her boot, she flicks the business end of it at him, causing the painting to disappear out of his hands with a flash. Halfway to his feet, he pauses, and frowns at her in confusion.

"It's hanging on the back of your closet door," she explains, tucking her wand out of sight again, "where your Selena Gomez poster *used* to be."

He blinks and raises an eyebrow at this as he settles back down onto the ground next to her. "Used to be? Why? Where is it now?"

"Gee, I dunno." Alex grins tightly at him, and shrugs. "Where does stuff go when you don't give a damn where you flash it to?"

"A-lex! That's the second one you've—"

"Oh, I know," Alex says, her grin spreading even wider.

(And OK, so this falls firmly into 'hateful bitch' territory too, yeah, but she doesn't feel nearly as bad about this one. Because, c'mon. Dork should buy a freakin' clue and take the hint, already.)

Justin stares at her for a long moment, then sighs and shakes his head, muttering under his breath as he looks back at the fire, the way he does when she does something that infuriates him. The corners of his mouth are turned slightly up instead of down, though, telling her that it's the *good* kind of infuriating, at least. Which is kind of what she was going for, score.

"All right," he sighs in resignation. "So what happens now?"

"Uhhhh...now?"

(And this time it's Alex's turn to blink in frown in confusion. Because that's a question she hadn't been expecting. She probably should have—it's Justin after all, who never does anything without a plan—but true to form, she didn't think much farther ahead than 'Get Justin to like me again'.)

Justin turns his face back towards her, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"Um, well..." Alex stammers, winging it, as she always does in times like these. "Harper thinks that we—I mean, that *Archimedes and future_haley*—should probably just keep things online for now. And kind of, y'know, feel it out? Before taking things to the next level? Run it up the ol' flagpole, see if they feel like saluting?"

"Oh, Harper said that, huh?" Justin smirks. "Because that totally sounds like something she'd say, and not at all like words that you put in her—"

He breaks off suddenly and sits up suddenly, frowning at her as something clicks home behind his eyes, making Alex groan inwardly

"Waitasec, Alex, exactly how much does Harper know about all this?"

"Ummmm...LOOKOUT, MONGOOSE!"

"AAAAHHHHHHH!"

And then Alex goes "oof!" as Justin hurls himself at her bodily, crash-tackling her to the ground and covering as much of her body with his as humanly possible. Alex gasps at the sudden warmth and feel and smell of him, pinning her to the floor of the rainforest. She presses her palms against his chest in an effort to get enough space with which to catch her breath. (And wow, turns out it really is as firm as it looks.)

"Justin, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"SHIELDING YOU FROM THE RABID MONGOOSE! WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

"Oh..." Staring up at him—jaw set firmly, head jerking from one side to the other at the merest flicker of movement—Alex feels her entire body flush, from her cheeks right on down. And though she stops trying to push him up and off of her, she keeps her palms pressed flat against his bare chest, kind of enjoying the subtle double-thump of his heartbeat beneath them. And, um, how firm his pecs are to the touch. And she can't help but think that a couple thousand Jalan-shipping fangirls worldwide would be flooding their panties if they could see her right now.

(She oughta know. She's one of them.)

"I don't see it, Alex," Justin says finally, the tension going out of him as he looks down at her. "I think you might have frightened it off when you screamed."

Alex suppresses a shudder when his grey eyes meet hers. "When *I* screamed? Pfft, in your dreams, Justine."

Justin snorts, his eyes tightening at the edges a little, even as one corner of his mouth quirks up sardonically. He opens his mouth to say something he probably thinks is biting and clever, but stops short when she begins to lightly stroke the pads of her thumbs back and forth across his nipples.

(What? Look, it's not like she did it on purpose, OK? They just kind of...did that on their own. Without her meaning to. At all. Stupid horny thumbs.)

"Uh..." Justin gulps. And to his credit, his voice doesn't crack nearly as much as she expects. "May-maybe we ought to head back now?"

"Mmm, I don't think so," Alex replies, giving him a wicked little grin, as her thumbs begin to trace circles around his nipples. (Because she's never been one to stop doing anything that makes him uncomfortable. Not even if she didn't mean to do it in the first place. Nope.) "I'm not in the mood to head back, just yet. And since I'm the only one who actually thought to bring her wand with her..."

"Thought to bring her—? Alex, you kidnapped me! How on Earth was I supposed to—?"

"Well, I thought boy scouts always came prepared, Justin," Alex says, doing that throaty-husky thing with her voice that boys

seem to like. She's brazenly kneading his pecs with both hands now, rubbing the heels of her palms roughly against his stiffening nipples. (And hey, who knew that boy nipples did that too?) And even though she knows that she's practically tap-dancing across a minefield, here, the effect it's having on Justin is way too delicious to even think about stopping.

Breathing heavily, running the tip of his tongue across quivering lips, Justin sets his jaw and narrows his eyes at her, the very picture of self-control.

"I thought you said you wanted Archimedes and future_haley to keep things online, for now," he says, in that breathy, scandalized voice of his that—if she's completely honest with herself—has always given her butterflies.

"You're right, I did," Alex nods. "But I *also* said I was trying to recreate a moment, here."

And with that, she pulls her hands away from his chest, and turns beneath him until she's lying on her side, legs bent at the knee, one arm draped across her tummy as she pillows her head on the other. Staring into the crackling fire, she feels more than sees Justin stare at her for a moment, hesitating in his confusion, before he slowly and awkwardly lowers himself onto the ground behind her, and spoon his body into hers. Just like he did that night a year ago, when he thought she was asleep.

"Y-You mean like this?" he asks. And the way his voice is shaking is both hilarious and adorable at the same time. To her credit, she only giggles a little as she nods, and reaches back to take his hand in hers, intertwining their fingers as she draws his arm over her. Just the way he didn't that night a year ago, but the way that—if she's completely honest with herself—she'd oh so wanted him to.

"Hey, I thought you said you *didn't* bring your wand with you, Justin," Alex says with a grin, wiggling her bottom a little against him, unable to help herself. Justin's entire body stiffens before he hurriedly scootches back away from her. Alex giggles again as he rearranges himself, so that his crotch isn't pressed right up against her. Then he lets out a little sigh—of contentment, exasperation, or both, Alex isn't entirely sure—as he props himself up on his other elbow, and rests his chin in his palm.

"OK, so now what?" he asks. And even though he's trying really hard to sound annoyed, she can hear the underlying excitement in his voice. Just like every time she's ever asked him to fix something she messed up. "Are we supposed to stay here all night? Because we will get caught, you know that."

"Nah, not all night," Alex says. "Just long enough."

Justin's breath hitches as she feels him stiffen against her again. "Uh, long enough for...?"

Alex lifts her head up off her arm and turns to look up over her shoulder at him. "For you to tell me another bedtime story, egghead. *Duh.*"

Justin's entire body seems to sag as he exhales in relief, before he shakes his head at her. "Yeah, somehow I didn't have the presence of mind to bring my laptop with me when you brought me here unexpectedly against my will, either. And don't try flashing it in, either. Magic doesn't work on plastic, remember? You'll just wind up teleporting the metal parts and wrecking it."

"Oh, please," Alex scoffs, lowering her head back onto her arm. "Like you *don't* know every single word of each of your precious little dribbles off by heart. I *know* you, dorkus. You have an idiotic memory."

"*Eidetic!* The word is *eidetic!* And for the last time they're *drabbles*, not—!"

Justin breaks off, sighs and shakes his head again, muttering under his breath as he looks back at the fire, the way he always does when she infuriates him. His squeezes her hand in his, though, so it's the *good* kind of infuriating. Which, again, was what she was going for. Score.

"I'll only tell you a story if you *promise* to practice with your *Wacom*," he says. "And post the results on comm. Because your art is way too good to be hidden behind the home gym where nobody's ever gonna see it. Deal?"

Alex lets out a long-suffering sigh, then shrugs lazily against him. "I'll think about it."

"Hmmp," Justin grunts with disapproval. But then he lowers his head and nuzzles her shoulder, drawing her hair back and away from her face, before he lowers his lips to her ear.

"Alan Rubik was thirteen years old, and his little sister Julia very nearly eleven," he whispers, his breath so warm against her skin that it makes her shiver, "when she finally became a wizard just like him. And neither poor little Alan's life, nor his eyebrows, were ever quite the same again..."

Author's Note, the second: Yeah, yeah, I know...still no kiss, yet. What? I can't give you *everything* you want in a single chapter, can I? "Always leave 'em wanting more," as the saying goes... :P

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

xxiii.

The return to Puerto Rico (or '*Campfire Scene 2: Campfire Harder*' as Alex likes to think of it) proves to be a turning point, in more ways than one.

After nearly a week of pointed silence and general avoidance of one another, she and Justin go more or less back to normal, taunting and teasing one another all through breakfast the morning after. Though nobody asks what happened, Jerry and Theresa share a glance of relief tinged with resignation, or possibly vice-versa. Harper, naturally, needs no explanation—the whole thing was her idea, after all—and is so obviously delighted that she's practically bursting as she rearranges her bacon, eggs and hashbrowns into a crude recreation of *Forbidden Flame*. Justin eyes it suspiciously for a second before Alex accidentally-on-purpose knocks over Harper's orange juice with her elbow, completely flooding her plate. Everyone else jumps back from the table and starts yelling at her at once, except for Max, who blinks at Harper's plate as though it's a revelation.

"Ohmigosh! Why have I never thought of that before! ORANGE-COLORED BREAKFAST! Alex, you're a GENIUS!"

And then Max dumps his own glass of OJ all over his food, prompting everyone to yell at *him*, instead. Grinning to herself, Alex swipes a piece of bacon off Justin's plate and munches on it happily, enjoying the conveniently ensuing chaos.

Even as everything returns to status quo IRL, though, things begin to take an interesting turn online between *future_hayley* and *Archimedes*. When Alex hops on Livejournal that afternoon to check the reaction to *Forbidden Flame* after school—or, y'know, after *she's* done with school, anyway, because how useful is sixth-period English really gonna be once she's become a full wizard?—she's surprised to see that Justin has *already* scanned and posted the hi-res version, as promised, replacing her crappy little cell-phone pic. And not only does it look about a gajillion times better, but the glowing way in which Archimedes describes it, and her (including words like 'superlative', 'evocative' and 'incredibly adroit') actually makes her choke up a little. (Or at least it does once she hits up thesaurus dot com to learn what those words actually *mean*. In your face, sixth-period English!)

Justin's little band of perverts goes cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs over it. Though the hi-res version hasn't been up for more than a few hours at most, the comment thread already runs across multiple pages, each one filled with glowing reviews. Granted, most of them are one or two words at most, if that—"ASDFLJKL! 2 CUTE!"—but several actually run on for multiple sentences. Paragraphs, even. Especially, Alex is more than a little jazzed to see, from several of the other Jalan fan-artists whose own work she's seen and admired. (And one of the most enthusiastic replies? Comes from the chick whose DeviantART profile Alex stumbled onto way back when. Yeah, the one that sent her running to the shower in an attempt to bleach the images out her brain. Ironic much?)

Some people she recognizes from the overall *Charmed and Dangerous* fanbase, who she knows don't particularly ship Jalan, have also dropped by to comment on it. Apparently it's being linked all over, on Twitter, Facebook, and on other C&D comms and forums. And while some of them use it as a platform to either hate on the ship, or the whole idea of literal sibcest in general, even these turn out to be begrudgingly, backhandedly complimentary. ("*Such a shame to see you wasting such obvious talent on a disgusting, immoral pairing like this...*") And to Alex's surprise, even a small handful of anons mention that though they're not really fans of *Charmed and Dangerous* at all, they just *had* to comment on what a beautiful piece it is.

future_hayley's inbox overflows as people add her to their friends lists, or send her private messages asking her for a link to her deviantART account, begging to see more of her work, or requesting commissions of their own. For the first time in her life, Alex gets a sense of what it must be like to be popular and...well, *liked*...instead of being simply infamous, in the manner to which she's grown accustomed. And, um, it kinda scares the everliving crap out of her.

Sitting next to her on the orange couch as they scroll through it all, Harper is quietly but insufferably smug about what her oh-so-brilliant plan has done for her best friend. And sitting next to *her*, Zeke stares in open-mouthed wonder.

"This is *incredible*!" he says. "I mean it, Alex. Even my celebrated three-way *SG-1/Ewok Adventure/Lord of the Rings* crossover fic didn't generate *this* much of a response. And *that* won a *Corrie*!"

"Uh-huh," Alex murmurs absently, without taking her eyes off the screen.

"Also, I'm more than a little shocked that there's still this many people even *on* Livejournal," Zeke says. "I mean, have they never *heard* of tumblr?"

"Zeke, honey..." Harper smiles at him fondly, and pats him on the shoulder. "Seriously, let it go."

Alex turns to look at them. "So whaddo I do now?"

"Do?" Zeke scoffs. "You bask in the glory, my friend. Revel in it. For today, you truly have won the internets, and a better day you shall never see in your entire life."

"Or you could thank them," Harper says brightly, giving Zeke's shoulder a squeeze.

Alex blinks at her. "What, you mean *all* of them? Are you high? There's, like, a bazillion comments here!"

"It's only polite, Alex," says Harper. She leans back and smooths out the front of her lime-in-the-coconut-themed dress. "I always make it a point to thank everybody who compliments me on my fashion sense, no matter how tedious and repetitive it may get."

Frowning, Alex opens her mouth to ask how often *that* really happens, but thinks better of it when she remembers that Harper has reprogrammed her brain to hear insults as compliments.

"It is generally-accepted netiquette, Alex," Zeke nods. "You're also socially obligated to friend back everybody who friended you."

"Wait, why? They're not friends! I've never even spoken to most of these dorks before!"

"Hey, don't look at me. I don't make the rules." Zeke says, holding up both hands. "But *follow-for-follow* is a social contract that predates even Compuserve, man. That's, like, before we were born."

Alex blinks at him as though he's speaking in tongues—which he might as well be—then winces and shakes her head. "Zeke, what are you even doing here? Justin's not even home!"

"I...er...uh..." Stammering, Zeke blushes and glances at Harper, then quickly looks away and seems to find the toes of his shoes incredibly interesting. "He, um, told me to meet him here."

"Of course he did, dear," Harper says, winking at Alex as she pats Zeke between the shoulder-blades. Which, of course, only makes him blush harder.

"Ugh," Alex groans, like the frustrated Sayley shipper she is, before she shoves her Macbook across the coffee table towards Zeke. "Well, here. If you're gonna hang out, you can at least make yourself useful."

And that's how *future hayley* goes from having zero friends to 163 in the space of an afternoon. And also how she gains a reputation for being both polite and prompt in her responses to comments.

"A lot of these people are wondering if Archimedes' drabble inspired your painting, Alex," Harper says, peering over Zeke's shoulder as he pecks away at the keyboard frantically. "What do you want us to say?"

Lounging in the armchair, with her legs thrown over the arm, Alex tears her attention away from a *How I Met Your Mother* rerun (which she's really only started watching to catch the occasional glimpse of David Henrie) and pauses in the middle of munching on a dill pickle to consider.

"Tell them...tha-a-a-a-at...Archimedes was *definitely* the reason I painted that picture in the first place," she decides, then takes another bite.

Zeke nods silently and continues typing, as Harper glances at her with a twinkle in her eye.

"Well played," she observes.

"T'anks," Alex smirks, crunching a mouthful of pickle, as she points the remote at the TV, and jams her thumb down on the 'Next Channel' button. "I try."

Later that night, dressed in her *My Little Pony* pajama bottoms and a prototype *Punk Dollhouse* T-shirt, Alex checks her LJ messages again, and is surprised to see a PM from *Archimedes* among the many items in her Inbox. Heart thumping in her throat, she clicks it first, because it's really the only one she gives anywhere close to a shit about, anyway.

"If you're going to have Z do all your replies for you," it reads, "you could at least have the decency to keep him from reccing his awful Wicket/Jack O'Neill/Galadriel fic in every other post. Corrie or no, it's an absolute travesty that shouldn't be inflicted on anyone, if only for the ending. I have never, in all my days, seen Chief Chirpa written so ridiculously OOC."

Alex grins to herself as she reclines against a pillow on her bed. Her grin only widens when she notices the next message down tells her that Archimedes has added her as a friend.

She friends him right back, of course. Only because it's generally-accepted netiquette, after all. Follow-for-follow. Precedes Compu...something or other. Before they were born, and all that crap.

xxiv.

The next morning, the thin, acne-scarred barrista with the faux-hawk at the Starbucks near Washington Square Park, where Alex has become kind of a regular since Christmas, blinks at her in surprise as he hands over her regular order of a venti mochachino and a chocolate biscotti.

"Oh, hey. We normally don't see you in here this early," he says with a smile. "What brings you in before the crack of noon?"

"Oh, I make it a point never to ditch the same period two days in a row," Alex replies, waving one hand dismissively. "I'm an equal-opportunity ditcher. Less hurt feelings, that way. Besides, I'm *kinda* supposed to be doing this History presentation right now, that I *sorta* haven't done anything for? So, y'know, it seemed like a no-brainer to change it up a little."

"Heh, nice. Won't your T.A. be pissed, though?"

"Enh," Alex shrugs. "What's one more detention, really? Just gives me a chance to catch up on my sleep."

"Detention?" The barrista goes pale beneath his soul-patch and double eyebrow piercing. "Wait, you—you mean you're still just in *high school*?"

"Yeeeeeeaaaaah," Alex says slowly, one eyebrow raised. "Why?"

"Uh...no reason," he says, clearing his throat and looking vaguely uncomfortable. He gestures awkwardly to the espresso machine to his left. "Look, I should really get back to...um, y'know. Enjoy your...uh, thing."

And with that, he turns away, flushing darkly as he fiddles with the machine, despite there not being any customers behind her. Alex blinks at him, then smiles to herself as she carries her drink and her biscotti to her usual table, in the corner by the window. Setting them down on the table, she unslings her bag from her shoulder and unpacks her silver Macbook. And as she sits down and waits for it to boot up, she glances around at all the hipster NYU students, with thier own Macbooks and fancy drawing tablets, and smirks proudly to herself that she's one of them.

(Or at least close enough in appearance to fool somebody. Which is all that matters to her, really.)

Leaning back on her chair as she munches on her biscotti, Alex starts up Safari, then signs into *future_hayley's* LiveJournal, and clicks on the link to access her *Friends* page. And, sipping her drink, she settles in for a nice, leisurely morning of good, old-fashioned Internet-stalking.

Having (finally) been friended by Justin on his *Archimedes* account gives Alex full access to all the *Jalan* fics archived on his blog, rather than just those he's cross-posted to "the Pit". (Which, she's learned from Zeke, is how Fanfiction dot net is less-than-affectionately known in some circles.) And, sweet zombie Jesus, but there's a *lot* of them. Though it looks like he's only been active in the *Charmed* and *Dangerous* fandom for a little over a year and a half, there's well over two dozen stories, here. Several of which are multi-chapter epics that run for tens of thousands of words. Letting out a low whistle as she scrolls through them, Alex can't help but wonder where he finds the time, what with school and wizard lessons piled on top of his insane amount of extra-cirriculars. Has he learned to type while hopping up and down on one foot, or what? Does the dude just not *sleep*?

Not all of them are *Jalan* fics, she notices. Scrolling back through his archives, she finds most of his earliest stories are "gen" fic with no pairing—usually attempts to correct what he feels are glaring errors or ommissions in the text of the *CnD* books. Or they're tagged as 'Ophilian', being schmoopy, G-rated fics about Alan and his star-crossed vampire girlfriend, Ophelia. (Ugh, gag.) None of these seem to have gotten much of a response—just a few comments here and there, often months after the fact, most of which amount to little more than 'meh'.

Only one story from this bunch gets more than five comments (and, coincidentally, ups the rating to a mild 'T'). It's a revenge fantasy, in which Alan "accidentally" slips both Julia and Hayley half of the same love potion, so that Julia can experience firsthand how embarrassing it is to have Hayley obsessed with her. It backfires on him, though, when Julia winds up being way into it (which raises Alex's eyebrows more than a little). She doesn't actually read the story—because, hi, it's 12,000 freakin' words long, and also ew!—but a quick skim of the comments lets her breathe easier, given that most of them accuse him of being a "bullshit tease" for having the potion wear off "just as things were getting good".

And thank Christ for that. Because things are weird enough *without* her having to deal with the thought of Justin writing porny fic about her getting it on with Harper. (Although, just the fact that he *almost* let it get that far...seriously, freakin' ew.)

Working her way forward from that, Alex is surprised to run into a two month gap during which Archimedes doesn't appear to have posted anything at all. At first she assumes it corresponds to the several weeks last year during which he'd dropped practically *everything*, to find and rescue Juliet from the clutches of the evil mummy who'd taken her captive. But something about that seems...off, somehow. Shrugging to herself—because, look, if she were any good with dates, she'd probably be passing History, OK?—she clicks on the next available entry...

...and finds that the first story he posted after his hiatus—and his very first story tagged as 'Jalan'—is *Firelight and Fidelity*. Which, thinking back on it now, was posted almost two months to the day after their first wizard competition, in Puerto Rico.

(She might not be good with dates, but you just don't forget the day you become a full wizard and lose both your brothers to a magic reality vortex, all right? Even if it was only temporary. Kinda tends to stick with you.)

It's also his first fic to garner comments in the double-digits. *Archimedes*, it seems, finally found his audience.

The gen fics all but disappear from that point on, aside from the occasional drabble that rants about a plot hole or an error in continuity. (Because he's Justin, and he'll never be able to entirely let things like that go.) The Ophelian fics continue for a bit, but judging just from the comments, there's a different tone to them now. They've gone from fluffy 'twue wuv fowever' type stories to angsty one-shots in which Alan debates whether he and Ophelia *really* belong together. And most of them, she can't help but notice, are tagged as 'Ophelian, implied one-sided Jalan'.

This freaks Alex out, a little. (Well, maybe 'freaks out' is a little strong, but it definitely gives her a bit of the wiggins.) Not the evidence of his growing crush on her—she's crossed so far over that line that, by now, it's a dot in her rearview mirror—but how early it's shown up. Three months after Puerto Rico, when all these were posted, Justin was still dating Juliet. No, not just dating—they'd been practically inseparable. And he'd been completely obnoxious about it, even moreso than Justin *usually* was. At the time, she'd assumed that he'd been rubbing her nose in it, the fact that he had a girlfriend while she'd been single ever since Dean had moved away.

She never would have suspected that Justin was actually overcompensating. That every time he kissed Juliet, it was Alex he was thinking of, even if he didn't want to be.

So, yeah: wiggins.

In the meantime, in between his little guilt-ridden tableaux, Justin also begins posting the first chapters of *Fortress of Solitude*, going back to the beginning when Alan first learned he was a wizard, as well as how much his little sister really mattered to him. Archimedes' growing legion of friends and followers welcome it as a lighthearted counterpoint to the mooney, conflicted angst of his other stories. But Alex sees it for what it really is: an analysis of the earliest days of their relationship, the earliest point at which it became obvious that they weren't normal people...in more ways than one.

It continues like that for the next few months' worth of entries—angsty Ophelian one-shots alternating with chapters of *Fortress*—with each new post, he gains more and more comments. In between, he starts posting links to other fics he's enjoyed, the majority them being Jalan fics which Alex recognizes from the 'Best of' thread he started on *julia_alan*, for her benefit, just after Christmas. He also starts replying to some of his comments with more than a polite-yet-terse "*Glad you liked it! Thanks for reading!*" Gradually, the guilt-ridden Ophelian fics start to take a back seat to the updates of *Fortress*, while—at the same time—Archimedes integrates himself more and more into the community of Jalan-shippers.

Then, a little over four months after Puerto Rico (at least, by her reckoning), something really jarring happens.

First, Archimedes posts a really, *really* dark one-shot entitled *In Sheep's Clothing*. In it, Alan accidentally gains knowledge of the future. As a result, he stalks and captures Graydon Blackmace—Julia's ex-boyfriend-to-be—sending him off to Monster Jail well before they can even start dating, and he can break her heart. And not only does he get away with it, he actually receives a commendation from the Monster Hunters' Council, what with Graydon being a centuries-old werewolf masquerading as a high school student, after all. He even gains a little grudging respect from Julia for taking down such a dangerous creature all by himself. But it all tastes like ashes to a guilt-ridden Alan, who knows that—werewolf or not—Graydon didn't really deserve his fate, and that he's altered the course of history for his own selfish ends. Because Alan, of course, is secretly in love with Julia.

"Hmm," Alex murmurs, over the rim of her half-full mochachino. Because she's not quite sure how to feel about that.

It gets worse. Archimedes' very next post following *that* is a poll for his readers, in which he asks the question: "*If you knew something terrible was about to happen to someone you cared for very much—maybe even loved—but that it had to happen in order to preserve reality as we know it, would you act to prevent it? Or would you stand by and let history take its course?*"

What follows is a long and spirited debate follows in the comments, running over several pages. Alex has more than a little trouble following it. The names 'Edith Keeler' and 'Sam Beckett' keep coming up, for one thing—brandished like weapons—but

nobody bothers to provide any context for who these people are or why they're relevant. She gets the sense, though, that the commenters quickly polarize: one group clinging to something called the "Temporal Prime Directive", with the other firmly believing in "putting right what once went wrong".

Throughout the discussion, Archimedes flits back and forth between both sides, acting as part moderator, part Devil's Advocate. Eventually, though, it spins out of his control and collapses into a flame war, when some idiot inevitably Godwin's Laws the whole thing by comparing it to going back in time to bump off Hitler's ancestors. Archimedes winds up closing the poll as a result, but only after a narrow victory has been achieved: 52% of his readers hew to the Temporal Prime Directive, opting to stand by and let history take its course, in spite of the hurt it might cause.

"Thanks, everybody," Archimedes responds, right before he shuts down the thread. "*Believe it or not, this really helped. I think I know what to do now.*"

Alex feels a shiver run through her that has nothing to do with the chill radiating off the window next to her. Because while Justin's readers clearly think they've been helping him work through something for a fic, Alex is beginning to suspect they may have been more to it than that. A *lot* more to it.

Leaning back in her chair with a frown, she wraps her scarf a little tighter around her neck, and wraps both hands around her mochachino, wondering. She feels some very weighty questions beginning to form in the back of her mind, accompanied by some rather conflicted feelings swirling around in the pit of her stomach. Quickly, before either of them can take shape, Alex reaches up and practically slams her Macbook closed. Then she stands up to tuck it away in her bag for good measure. And for the first time in her life, she actually curses herself for ditching first period.

Was a stupid little internet poll *really* the only thing that had kept Justin from turning Mason in, to keep him from breaking her heart? If the poll had gone the other way, would he have gone through with it?

And given how things turned out...would she really be all that upset if he had?

Alex winces and shakes her head sharply as she zips her bag closed. Dammit, questions like this are exactly why she's put off reading Book Six as long as she has. And not just because she's avoiding the whole whirlwind Julia/Graydon romance (and its inevitable shitty end) like the plague it is, either.

No, it's what lies *beyond* that which really scares her. For someone who prides herself on living day-by-day like she does, just acknowledging the fact that there *is* a future to worry about is frightening enough. And the thought of actually knowing what *happens* there? Shit-your-pants terrifying. Totally.

Because what if it sucks? And what if you can't change it? Or what if you *can*...but it only makes things worse?

"Ugh," Alex groans, wrenching her eyes shut and pressing the heels of her hands into them. Great, now she's thinking like those nerds on Justin's LiveJournal. Next she'll be dreaming up a foolproof way of going back in time to shove Hitler's grandmother in front of a bus...or whatever it was they had instead of busses in the olden days.

"Excuse me, but would you like some Tylenol, or something?"

It takes Alex a second to realize that the question is meant for her. Raising her head out of her hands, she finds herself looking at one of the other regulars, a lanky red-haired girl not much older than herself. One of those trendy graphics design majors that she aspires to be, judging by her clothes, Macbook and fancy-looking drawing tablet.

"Huh?" she asks, then inwardly kicks herself for sounding like such an unsophisticated little high school girl.

The redhead just smiles fondly at her, then reaches into her purse and pulls out a small white bottle with a red top.

"I get headaches after squinting at the computer for way too long, too," she says, offering it to Alex. "Occupational hazard."

"Um, no thanks, I'm fine," Alex says awkwardly, shaking her head. Desperate to change the subject, and overcome with the need to impress this girl with her worldliness, for some stupid reason, she nods at the girl's table. "I really like your Wacom."

"Oh, thank you!" the redhead beams. "It is pretty, isn't it? I just got it for Christmas. It's a Cintiq, actually, but it's made by the same company. It's a huge step up from the Wacom. Way more intuitive."

"Oh," Alex says, feeling her cheeks and the skin behind her ears beginning to get hot. "Um, yeah. That's what I've heard."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," the redhead says, her smile fading a little, "I loved my Wacom! So much! I actually miss it sometimes! It's just that learning to draw on it was, like...figuring out how to draw with my left foot, if that makes any sense."

"I know, right?" Alex blurts out. "How do people do it? You see all these dudes on DeviantART doing amazing things with it, but anything *you* do comes out looking like it was made by a rabid mongoose!"

The redhead blinks at this, then tilts her head to the side a little. The look she gives Alex would be really condescending, if it wasn't for the sympathetic twinkle in her green eyes. "Having a little trouble with it, huh?"

"Only with the digital part," Alex says lamely. "And the art part. And the...not turning out like it was drawn by a two year-old who can't manage to color between the lines...part."

"That is a very specific level of suck," the redhead says, then places one hand over her heart. "And believe me, I *know* that level. I have *lived* and *died* on that level. Do you have it with you?"

Alex glances down at her bag. She does, actually. Though it took her about forty-five minutes to find the stylus in her room, after she'd tossed it away in frustration on Christmas night and forgotten about it, both it and the tablet had been sitting in her bag ever since Justin had posted the HQ version of *Forbidden Flame*. Y'know, just in case she decided to take another stab at it. Not that she was ever gonna...

"I could show you a few things, maybe?" the redhead offers. "One rabid mongoose to another?"

Alex takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, considering.

"Normally I'd say no," she says, then winces to herself. "But there's this thing where I can never quite manage to let down a random, overly-friendly chick with red hair, so..."

"Um, yay for me being your very particular brand of kryptonite, then?"

"Trust me," Alex sighs as she sits back down. "Since kindergarten."

The redhead gestures to Alex's bag. Alex hesitates a moment, then unzips it to pull her Macbook out. Turning it back on, she digs her Wacom out of the bottom of her bag, and plugs it in.

"I'm not very good at this," she warns, as she boots up Photoshop, in a rare display of modesty. "In fact, I'm really, *really* bad."

"Oh, *everybody* is, at first," the redhead says, looking over her shoulder. "Leonardo Da Vinci would barely be able to draw stick figures his first time using one of these, but he'd be the first in line to try. The trick is not to get discouraged, and keep trying."

"Ugh, practice," Alex says bitterly. "I *knew* there was a catch."

"Well, yeah, but...then one day," the redhead continues, "without realizing it, you'll forget to worry about how much you suck, and you'll suddenly be *awesome*, just like you always have been with a pencil and paper."

"Snkt," Alex half-snorts, half-laughs. "Just like magic."

"Yeah, sort of, I guess," the redhead says, oblivious, as Photohop finally stops loading, and presents Alex with a blank layer to work on. "OK, let's focus on your comfort zone. What's the one thing you've drawn over and over, so often that you could draw it with your eyes closed? We'll start there."

"Uh..." Alex holds the stylus in mid-air, just above her Wacom. "I'm not sure I wanna—"

"Look, I don't care what it is, OK?" the redhead cuts her off. "Mine was Squirtle hosing down Charmander, for crying out loud, so I'm in no position to judge, trust me. Just draw what you know."

Alex smiles at her. Not mockingly, as she would have done only a few short months ago, but warmly. "You're in fandom?"

The redhead blushes a little beneath her freckles, but nods. "*Kingdom Hearts* and *Pokémon* when I was younger. *Torchwood* and *Doctor Who* right now. You?"

"Um, *Charmed* and *Dangerous*, mainly," Alex says, and it's weird to admit it out loud. "Oh, and *Judy Axehand*, a little, but I'm not super-active."

"Oh, thank God," the redhead grins, pressing a hand to her chest in mock-relief. "For a second there, I was worried you were gonna say *Twilight*!"

"Ugh, emo sparkle-vampires? Yeah, no. Though I *would* do terrible things to Taylor Lautner, if I had the chance."

"Oh, honey, wouldn't we all?" the redhead giggles, elbowing Alex in the ribs, then nods at her Macbook. "OK, so draw me something from *Charmed and Dangerous*, then."

"Well...all right," Alex says hesitantly, pressing the stylus down on her tablet. "Just...promise not to laugh, OK?"

xxv.

Three hours later, Alex bursts through the door of her art class, slams it shut behind her, and dashes past Mr. Laritate towards her easel without so much as an apology.

"Ahem," the principal says pointedly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Miss Russo, you are almost ten minutes late."

"I know, I know," she says, hurriedly unzipping her bag and pulling out her Macbook. "Trust me, I wouldn't have bothered to come in at *all* if June hadn't had to run to her Philosophy lecture."

"I beg your pardon?" Mister Laritate frowns as he watches her look around for somewhere to set down her Macbook. She finally settles on a table near the window, smiles, and uses one arm to sweep off it off, sending art supplies crashing to the floor in its wake.

"Alex!" Mister Laritate says. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Alex yanks her Wacom out of her bag and gestures to it pointedly. "Art! Duh!"

Puzzled, Mister Laritate frowns and cocks his head to one side. "And how is that art, exactly?"

"Digital art is the wave of the future, Mister Laritate," Alex says, without looking up at him, as she opens up her Macbook and boots up Photoshop. "And now that I know I don't have to *suck* at it, I am *not* gonna be left behind!"

Letting out a long suffering sigh as he comes up behind her, Mister Laritate watches as she loads up the picture she's been working on all morning, then lets out a 'tsk' of disappointment.

"It's not bad, Miss Russo, but I'd sincerely hoped you'd left behind your whole 'lone cay-ote howling at the moon' phase."

"I *have*," she snaps back, pressing the tip of her stylus to the tablet without looking up at him. "I'm just painting what I know, to get a feel for the new medium, OK? Besides, this one is totally different from the others. Trust me."

Mister Laritate raises one eyebrow, then glances from the screen to the look of fierce determination on Alex's face. The corners of his lips tug upwards, almost as of their own accord.

"Very well," he says, after a long moment. "Russo, you're excused from the Art-Off today. We'll call this...an independent study project."

"We're allowed to do independent study projects?" comes a voice from across the room. "MacGruder in!"

"MacGruder *out*," Mister Laritate says, pointing at him as he strides across the room. "If I see another Olivia Wilde 'anatomy study' from you this term, MacGruder, you are *failing* this course!"

Ignoring them, Alex continues working, and adds a new layer to her project. And behind the silhouette of the shaggy wolf howling at the moon, she begins to sketch the outline of a dorky-yet-well-muscled Monster Hunter, crouched in the bushes and brandishing a very, very large net...

Author's Notes: Wow, so that was a lot of ground to cover, huh?

In case anyone was wondering, the role of the random, overly-friendly redhead in Starbucks was played by Felicia Day, circa her appearance in the movie *June*. Because, y'know, this chapter wasn't already geeky enough, already. Bonus points to anyone who managed to pick out all the references. There's a few pretty obscure ones in there. :P

Massive thanks to **Not Just A Nerd** for her beta assistance, and helping to make sure I got Alex's voice right this time. Also to **iheartdisney128** for inspiring some of the dialogue in the middle section.

People keep asking when I'm going to post *Forbidden Flame*, Alex's painting of the campfire scene, or one of her infamous "lone wolf howling forlornly at the moon" pictures. As much as I'd love to, I really don't have the art chops for it. (Besides, if I took any

longer between updates than I already do, I think people might come after me with torches and pitchforks.) So if anyone else out there feels like taking a stab at it, please do so with my blessing. I'd be as excited to see it as anybody else. (Probably even more so!)

And finally, my thanks as always to everyone for reading, reviewing, alerting or favoriting *OTP*. It's hard to believe I've been writing it for over a year now, off and on. I can't tell you how much I appreciate everyone who's stuck with it for this long. While we're not quite in the home stretch yet, we're definitely approaching the final turn...

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Author's Note: So this chapter's a little shorter than usual for me, but that's the trade-off for updating so soon after the last one. Thanks again my lovely and talented beta **Not Just A Nerd** for her assistance in keeping everyone in-character. If you're one of those readers who's just started to get into Jalex, you really owe it to yourself to read her stuff. She's been writing for the pairing a *lot* longer than I have, and her stories are awesome.

Hopefully this update satisfies everyone who felt there wasn't quite enough forward momentum in the last one. Some of the seeds that I sowed as far back as Chapter 1 (and especially in Chapter 5) are finally starting to bear fruit, here. That final turn I promised last time? It's coming up pretty quick, folks!

Thank you as always for all your kind reviews, favorites and alerts. Or for just plain reading, period. I really appreciate it!

OK, that's enough preamble from me. On with the show...

xxvi

So it turns out that mentioning off-hand to the school principal during fifth period that she almost didn't bother to come in at all? Yeah, not the best choice Alex could have made. Particularly not on the same day that she's skipped out on her History presentation, which apparently is worth thirty percent of her grade for the semester. (Seriously, like half! Who knew?) Laritate calls her parents at home that night—right in the middle of wrestling, naturally which only makes things worse. One short, very terse phone conversation later, Alex finds herself staring down the business end of two very cheesed-off and slightly bloodthirsty lucha fans who've just missed the best match of the night.

Dad, true to form, gives her his patented "*we're not angry, we're disappointed*" speech, which is somewhat undermined by Mom interrupting him every few minutes to yell at her, mostly in Spanish. At least Alex has the presence of mind not to point out that she can't understand, lest she get crapped on for failing Spanish, too.

"Mister Laritate says that you told him you have some new hobby that's been keeping you up at night," Jerry adds, once he can get a word in edgewise. "So much so that you've been falling asleep in class."

"He *what*?" Theresa snaps, then spins around to glare at Alex. "You're *what*?"

"Ugh." Alex hangs her head and silently vows to strangle Laritate with his own bolo tie the next time she sees him.

"He *also* says," Jerry continues, more to Theresa than to Alex, "that she's been painting the same picture over and over again in art class. Of a wolf, howling at the moon. Like she's fixated on it, or something. He thought she was over it, but apparently she's just started again."

"I have *not* started again!" Alex says, her chin coming up sharply. "I told him, I'm just drawing something familiar while I figure out how to use that stupid tablet Justin bought me for Christmas! Besides, those stupid paintings don't *mean* anything! It was just an artistic phase, that's all. Look, if Da Vinci can have a Blue period—"

"Alex," Jerry cuts her off sternly, before his eyes soften a little at the edges. "C'mon, level with us. What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Alex lies. Because, seriously, if they think they're disappointed-not-angry *now*, it's nothing compared to how much they'll completely lose their shit if they ever *do* find out what her new "hobby" is. Not to mention who it revolves around.

As if on cue Theresa crosses her arms over her chest and tilts her head to one side, her eyes flaring.

"Do you think we're stupid, young lady? Do you really think we don't already know *exactly* what's going on? This isn't the first time we've gotten a call like this!"

"Honey, wait..." Jerry says, glancing at his wife with a warning look in his eyes. "I think I know what you're gonna say, and I'm not sure we should be—"

"You're not *sure*?" Theresa says, staring at him incredulously. "Jerry, this is *exactly* what Justin warned us might happen! We have to put a stop to this before she does something stupid!"

Alex feels the bottom drop out of her stomach, even as her heart leaps up into her throat. A thousand panicked thoughts crowd into her head all at once, jostling each other for her attention. And it's a clear measure of the company she's been keeping lately

that the only one she can pick out clearly is "I've got a *baaaaaaad* feeling about this..."

"Theresa...let's calm down and give Alex a chance to explain herself," Jerry says, patting the air with both hands. "We shouldn't just leap to the conclusion that *that's* what this is all about."

"What are you, blind? Of *course* that's what this is all about. This is exactly how Justin was last year!"

"HEY!" Alex reaches between them and snaps her fingers, drawing their attention back to her. "Remember me? The daughter you're disappointed-not-angry at? You wanna tell *me* what the hell's going on? What was it Justin warned you about?"

Jerry and Theresa exchange glances, silently continuing their argument for a moment longer, before Theresa takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

"Justin told your father that he was worried you were going to become obsessed with the idea of getting Mason back," she says, sounding oddly calm, "and that you might do something really reckless and dangerous to make it happen."

Alex blinks so hard in surprise that she can feel it in the back of her brain. The wave of relief that runs through her is so palpable that she actually goes weak at the knees, forcing her to plop down on the orange loveseat behind her to keep from collapsing to the floor in a heap.

"Ohmigod, *Mason*?" Alex laughs, aware that it comes out sounding more than a little manic. "*That's* what you think this is about?"

"Uh, yeah," Jerry says, glancing from her to Theresa and back, as though he's missing something. "The whole wolf motif was kind of a tell, see? And Mister Laritate *did* say that, in your last painting, you had somebody hiding behind the wolf with a net..."

"Oh, for the love of..." Alex giggles, sliding one hand over her face, and shakes her head. Sweet zombie Jesus, it's like a bad episode of *How I Met Your Mother*.

"We got a very similar call from Mister Laritate about this same time last year, but about *Justin*," Theresa sighs. "It turned out he was falling asleep in class, or skipping school altogether, because he was spending all his time hunting down that mummy who'd kidnapped Juliet."

"And look how that turned out," Jerry adds somberly. "And as awful as what happened to Juliet and Mason was, you kids actually got off *lucky*. That mummy could have wound up enslaving *all* of you...or even worse."

"Wait, wait, wait, stop," Alex says, waving one hand, still reeling from the giddiness of how incredibly *off* they are. "*Justin* told you I was going to flip my shi—um, lid—and go after Mason? When was this? And what the hell gave him *that* idea?"

Theresa looks at Jerry, holds up both hands and leans back. "OK, this part is all you. I seriously don't get all your hocus pocus malarky."

"It's not—!" Jerry breaks off with a grunt of annoyance, then takes a breath and starts again. "Justin came to me about two weeks ago and said he'd had a spontaneous premonition...uh, that is, a vision of the future that came out of nowhere."

Ignoring, for a moment, the fact that he clearly feels the need to dumb down his explanation for her benefit, Alex slides her hand off her face, and cocks an eyebrow at her father. "A vision of the future. Out of *nowhere*. Really."

"It can happen sometimes, particularly to really powerful wizards. Um, no offense."

Alex narrows her eyes at him, but resists the urge to point out—again—that, for all his stupid power and potential, Justin wasn't the one to win the competition the first time around. If only because Mom and Dad don't exactly remember it.

"And did he say exactly what this stupid, reckless thing I'm supposed to do is?" she asks instead.

"Actually, no," Jerry replies. "I asked, but he said it was all really vague. Just a really strong sense that you were going to do something crazy and impulsive to bring Mason back."

"And put the entire family in danger doing it," Theresa says pointedly.

"But that's ridiculous!" Alex blurts out as she jumps back up to her feet. "Mason was turned into a wolf for all eternity! Dad, you said yourself that there's no way to turn a werewolf back after he's been bitten by a vampire!"

"Nothing that's ever been tried has worked," Jerry nods. "It's what *hasn't* been tried that worries me, when it comes to you."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"That you constantly do things other that people can't, or *won't*, because you seem to think that life's rules don't apply to you," Theresa says softly, placing her hands on Alex's shoulders. "And as much as I admire your strength and your courage, *mija*, they scare *la mierda* out of me, sometimes. "

"Mom..." Alex groans, smiling despite herself at her mother's tendency to say all the really fun parts of a sentence in her native tongue.

"Hey, don't 'mom' me," Theresa says. "Are you honestly telling me that if you found out a way to get Mason back, no matter how crazy or farfetched it sounded, that you *wouldn't* be out that door the second you heard about it?"

"Please, she wouldn't even bother to use the door!" Jerry points out.

"Mom...Dad..." Alex sighs. "Look, six months ago? Yeah, totally! If I'd heard so much as a rumor that there was a way to find Mason and turn him back, I would've flashed my butt out of here faster than Mom can swear *en Español!*"

Theresa snorts, but narrows her eyes at Alex. "And what about now?"

Alex takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, then shakes her head.

"That's not what I want anymore," she says. "I mean, I'd wanna help him out, sure. I wouldn't want him to have to spend the rest of his life as a wolf if he didn't have to. But I wouldn't be doing it for *me*, because *I* wanted him back. I'm...over that, now. OK? So you don't have to worry."

(And yeah, so *that's* totally a lie. At least the part about them not having to worry about it, anyway. And maybe she feels the tiniest, uncharacteristic pang of guilt about it. Because, hi, if they had any idea *why* she didn't want Mason anymore—and who she now kinda, sorta wanted *instead*—they might wish she *had* gone and done whatever stupid thing they were afraid of.)

Jerry and Theresa share a long, meaningful look, before Jerry shrugs and Theresa nods at him. And for maybe the first time, Alex realizes that she and Justin aren't the only ones in the house who are capable of their particular brand of nearly-telepathic, non-verbal communication.

"OK, *mija*, we believe you," Theresa says, giving her a tiny smile, "but you're still grounded."

"What?" Alex shouts. "You're grounding me? For something I haven't even done yet? For something which, we agree, I'll probably never do? Ohmigod, this is so unfair!"

"Actually, no," Jerry says calmly, cutting her off in mid-tantrum. "What we are, in fact, grounding you for is cutting school, skipping out on your History presentation, and falling asleep in class."

"Ohhhhhh, right," says Alex, with a wince. "That stuff."

"Also for failing Spanish again," Theresa adds, elbowing her husband in the ribs and jerking her head at Alex. "Nobody who was passing would've pronounced *en Español* that badly."

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Alex stomps angrily up the spiral staircase, two at a time—because so what if the punishment fits the crime, it's still her right as a teenage girl to pout about it, goddammit—and storms down the upstairs hallway. Completely bypassing her own room, she stops instead in front of Justin's door, and literally kicks it in, Alex-proof security wards be damned.

Near the far wall, standing in front of a half-empty bookcase and surrounded by stacks upon stacks of books, Justin and Zeke both yelp and jump about a foot in the air, then turn around to stare at her, white-faced from fright.

"Alex?" Justin says, frowning at her. "What the heck! You nearly scared *la mierda* out of us!"

Alex glares at him for a second before turning her eyes on Zeke, who actually cringes in response.

"You!" she snaps, then jerks one thumb over her shoulder. "Out!"

"B-but we're right in the middle of alphabetizing J-Man's RPG books!" Zeke protests. "We've been at it for two solid hours, and we only just finished with AD&D!"

"Oh, you want letters? Here's some: IDGAF!" Alex snarls. "Now STFU and GTFO before IKYMFA!"

Zeke opens his mouth to reply, then breaks off and frowns at her, puzzled. "Wait, run that last one by me again?"

"OUT!" Alex howls, taking a threatening step towards him.

"Eep! Later dude!" Zeke squeals, flailing one arm in goodbye to Justin as he cuts a wide berth around Alex—scrambling over Justin's crisply-made bed to do so—and practically hurls himself out the door. Watching after him, Justin heaves a sigh and drops the book in his hand onto the nearest stack.

"Great, thanks Alex. Now I'll have to decide whether to shelve 3rd Edition and 3.5 together or seperately, all on my own. And you just *know* he'll have an issue with however I do it. What's *your* problem?"

"Why don't you tell *me*, Edith Keeler?" Alex growls, crossing her arms under her breasts. "Or should I call you Sam Beckett?"

"I—what? Why would you—?" Justin blinks a few times, then shakes his head sharply. "You know, this may be the first time that you've made a geek reference that I don't understand?"

"It's from *your* LiveJournal, you idiot!" Alex says, storming forward to poke him in the chest. "That whole thing where you polled your little band of perverts about whether or not to toss Mason in the hoosegow to keep us from dating?"

"Alex, shhhh!" Grimacing at her, Justin hurries over and shuts his bedroom door. "Zeke's probably still within earshot, and Mom and Dad are right downstairs! What's the matter with you?"

"The matter? You wanna know what's the matter?" Alex asks, furious. "I just got my ass grounded, for God only knows how long, because *you* told Dad two weeks ago that I was gonna go off and do something stupid to get Mason back someday!"

Justin blinks at this, and at least has the good grace to look chagrined. "Oh..."

"Yeah, *oh*!" Alex growls. "What the hell, Justin? First of all, we agreed over a *year* ago not to tell Mom and Dad about the books, so Future Harper didn't get in shit from the Wizards' Council!"

"I didn't tell them about the books...exactly," Justin begins, "I just—"

"And *second*," Alex cuts him off, "who the hell do you think you are, anyway? You don't get to decide my future for me, egghead! Only I'm allowed to mess it up! Got it?"

"Says the girl who's been putting a duplicate of me through college for the past three years so I won't have to go," Justin says wryly. He holds out his hand to her, as though initiating a handshake. "Nice to meet you, pot. I'm the kettle."

Alex's mouth drops open in shock as she stares at him, wide-eyed. "You *know* about that?"

Justin drops his hand to his side, and rolls his eyes. "Alex, of *course* I know about that! It's in the—"

He breaks off and looks to his right, squinting at the shelf where his worn copies of the *Charmed and Dangerous* books are neatly lined up between a set of Captain Jim Bob Sherwood bookends.

"You still haven't finished Book Six," he says, taking note of the one that's missing before turning back to her with a frown.

"You've had it for awhile. Have you even started it yet?"

Alex shrugs noncommittally. "I've been busy."

"You've been putting it off, you mean," Justin snorts.

"Nooooo, I mean I've been *busy*," Alex repeats. "See, there's this complete dork online, with this pathetic little cyber-crush on me? So distracting. He's been making it impossible for me to get anything else done."

"No I hav—I mean, no he has not!" Justin says. "I happen to know full well that he's been keeping his distance and giving you plenty of space to approach things on your own terms. If anything *you're* the distracting one, with all your frakking mixed signals..."

"Oh, you wanna talk mixed signals there, dude?" says Alex. She raises the back of her hand to her forehead, and leans back dramatically. "Oh woe is me! I can't possibly change destiny to keep the girl I love from getting her heart broken by her poor, doomed werewolf boyfriend! It would be oh so wrong! Waitasec, she's gonna try to get back with him now that *I'm* dating her? Well, then fuck destiny! Yoink!"

Justin's frown deepens. "Waitasecond...are you mad at me for trying to mess with your future, or because I didn't try hard enough?"

Alex lets her hand drop and stares at him as though he's speaking another language. "Duh! Yes!"

"But...that...doesn't..." Justin trails off, lets out a frustrated sigh, then shakes his head as he sits down on the edge of his bed.

"OK, for one thing," he says, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, "and you'd know this if you'd actually bother to *read* Book Six, that poll had nothing to do with you."

"Oh, *bullshit* it had nothing to do with me! You put it up right after you posted that fic about you hunting down Mason!"

"Well, yeah...I'm not saying I didn't consider it," Justin admits, "but it wasn't your future I was debating about changing. At least not directly."

"Right," Alex scoffs, placing her hands on her hips. "Now try pulling the other one. It has bells on it."

Justin cocks an eyebrow at her. "What? Bells? What's that supposed to—?"

"I don't know, I think it's a cowboy thing! The point is that I don't believe you, stupid! Whose future *were* you "directly" trying to change, then? No, lemme guess: Mason's?"

"No," Justin says, very quietly. "Juliet's."

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Author's Note: So, this is me apologizing right up front, both for the long delay between chapters—especially after the cliffhanger that ended the last one—and for the rather blatant exposition-dump you're about to read. I've already rewritten it almost completely from scratch twice, and I honestly think this is as good as it gets. I've at least tried at least to make it an entertaining one. (And to make it up to you, I *may* have also included some rather blatant fanservice. Yes.) Hopefully I've done a good enough job of foreshadowing that none of it feels like it's coming out of left field.

Massive amounts of gratitude as always to the lovely and talented **Not Just A Nerd**, not only for her unparalleled assistance in keeping everyone in-character, but also for helping me to unravel the tangle of Justin's feelings and motivation in this chapter. And thanks to all of you for reading, reviewing, favoriting and alerting. Otherwise I'd just be talking to myself, here, and would be a very sad panda, indeed.

Please to enjoy!

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"Alex, wait!" Justin calls after her, but Alex is already out the door and down the hall. Burning with equal parts anger and humiliation, she practically flies down the spiral staircase. Jerry and Theresa tear their attention away from the news and glance over the back of the couch at her as she continues past them, into the Sub Station below.

"Is everything all right, *mija*?" Theresa calls after her. "Where are you going?"

"Anywhere that Justin *isn't*," she growls over her shoulder without slowing down.

Justin's footsteps clank hurriedly down the staircase behind her—surprising, given how anal he usually is about safety, and how prone to turning his delicate ankles are—forcing Alex to pick up her own pace a little.

"Sooooo I'm guessing you already know that we mentioned the whole Mason thing to your sister...?" she hears Jerry say to him from the living room.

"Uh, yeah," Justin snaps, from above and behind her. "Thanks for the heads up, by the way. Really. Awesome."

Alex is already halfway across the dark and empty Sub Station by the time he comes into view, and peers over the black metal railing at her.

"Alex, c'mon...would you *please* stop and talk to me?"

Alex snorts loudly. Without so much as a glance over her shoulder at him, she lifts her left arm straight up into the air, her middle finger pointing towards the ceiling, letting him know in no uncertain terms what she thinks of *that* idea. Because, seriously.

"Oh, now *that's* real mature, Alex," Justin sighs. "Classy."

Ignoring him, Alex storms behind the counter without breaking stride, and shoves open the swinging door into the kitchen so hard that the hinges actually groan in protest. Crossing the kitchen in two strides, she heaves open the heavy steel door to the lair, and steps through, yanking it shut behind her. Then quickly, before he can follow, she hunches forward and hitches her right knee up to her chest to fish her wand out of her boot. Pointing the business end of it at the door, she dismisses the enchantment on it without so much as a word. It disappears with a flash, leaving only a blank brick wall in its place.

"*Hey nonny-nunny, ha-cha-cha*," she growls, without lowering her wand. The tip of it flares brightly again for a moment as she casts a spell-lock on the wall, sealing the lair off from the rest of the world until she deems fit to lift it. Which means that now Justin can't follow her, even if he tries magic. Nodding to herself, Alex turns and whips her wand onto the red velvet seat that Justin normally occupies during wizard lessons, then flops down into her Dad's brown, overstuffed recliner, fuming.

(Yeah, that's it: fuming. Not sulking. Not pouting. And definitely *not* on the verge of tears. Because, seriously, screw all *that* girly crap.)

She's barely had a chance to take a breath before the flashing, multicolored door that leads to the Wizard World swings open, and Justin leans in, smirking at her.

"Oh, goddamnit!" Alex groans in frustration, wincing and leaning forward to cover her face with both hands.

"Nice try," he says evenly, as she hears him step inside and shut the door behind him. "The spell lock was a nice touch, but you *always* forget to lock the portal."

"Ugh! Justin, go away!" Alex shouts, her voice muffled by her hands. (And not at all choked with not-tears. Nope. Not even.)

"No, not until you've given me a chance to explain," Justin says, his voice getting closer. "You ran out before I could finish. You've got entirely the wrong idea."

"Oh, really?" Alex drops her hands from her face and braces them on the armrests to shove herself to her feet. "Because the idea I've *got*, penis-breath, is that you wouldn't *dare* break your goddamned Temporal Prime Directive for *me*, but you sure as hell *would* for your precious Schnuggly Boo-Boo Kitty Fuck!"

"It's not like that, Alex. Really, it's not," Justin protests, his forehead creased with concern. Then, after a beat, he clears his throat and shrugs his shoulders uncomfortably, adding: "And it's Schnuggly Boo-Boo *McCutiekins*, actually, not—OW!"

He ducks and holds up both arms to shield his head as Alex starts furiously snatching up books, potion ingredients, spell components, and whatever other magical brickabrack she can lay her hands on, and whips them with all her might at her brother's head.

"ARE YOU SERIOUSLY CORRECTING ME RIGHT NOW, YOU STUPID! POMPOUS! DOUCHECANOE?"

"OK, OK, I'm sorry! Not in the face! *Not in the face!*"

"Oh SURE! You're SORRY!" Alex snaps, slowly circling about the lair to find more things to throw at him, even as Justin circles away from her. "Just like MASON! was SORRY! for proclaiming his UNDYING! FUCKING! LOVE! for her. RIGHT! IN! FRONT! OF! ME!"

"This is not the same thing, I swear!" Justin insists, dodging for dear life as potion vials, rodent skulls and enchanted crystals alike smash to pieces on the floor, walls and furniture all around him. He risks uncovering his face for a second to look at her, then holds out both hands in panic. "Waitwaitwait, not Dad's twelveball signed by the '75 Hippogriffs! He'll kill us both!"

Alex hesitates mid-wind-up, and glances at it, surprised to see it in her hand. Shrugging, she puts it back down on the shelf, and picks up a pair of petrified codfish to hurl at him instead.

"Agh!" Justin cries out, as one bounces off of his forehead. Glaring, he ducks under Volume One of the *Pseudonomicon*, and charges at her before she can pick up the other sixty-eight. Wrapping his arms around her in a bear hug, pinning her own arms to her sides, he holds her tightly even as she squirms and struggles and kicks to get free.

"JUSTIN! LET ME GO!"

"Dang it, Alex, knock it off!" he grunts, his surprisingly strong arms holding her tightly even as she squirms and struggles and kicks to get free. "Would you listen to me? I didn't want to change Juliet's future because I loved her!"

"BULLSHIT!"

"It's true! The whole reason I wanted to change it because I knew I *didn't!*" Justin says. "At least not nearly as much as I did you!"

Alex pauses in the middle of trying to bite down on Justin's bicep, and blinks. Clearing her throat, she takes a moment to compose herself, flipping her hair over her shoulder with a shake of her head.

"Go on," she says smoothly, sounding calm as can be.

Clearly, Justin isn't buying it, because he doesn't release his hold on her. He keeps his arms wrapped tightly around her, pinning hers to her sides, even as he heaves a sigh that sounds like it comes all the way from the soles of his feet.

"Things...*changed* between me and Juliet, after we got back from Puerto Rico," he explains. "At least, they changed for me. After everything that happened to us out there—'us' meaning you and me—I realized that, while I still cared about her, it wasn't just the same."

Alex takes a second to absorb this, then turns her face towards him.

"How do you mean?" she asks.

(And duh, it's not like she doesn't know exactly what he means—they communicate with each other non-verbally half the time,

after all—but look, there are some things that a girl really needs to hear out loud, OK?)

"I mean that I knew that we weren't meant to be together. 'We' meaning Juliet and I," Justin says, and the guilt in his voice is palpable. "I knew beyond any shadow of doubt that *shewasn't* the one with whom I was meant to spend the rest of my life."

"Snkt! *'With whom?'*" Alex mocks him, mostly out of reflex, even though she feels all warm and tingly inside. (And, if she's perfectly honest with herself, a little smug, too. Because as much as she'd liked Juliet, she'd kinda sorta hated her, too.)

"The problem was that *Juliet* didn't know that," Justin says sadly, ignoring her jab. "And apparently, neither did Future Harper."

Alex blinks at this, then grimaces in confusion.

"Huh?" she grunts. (And this time, she really *doesn't* know what he means.)

"I told you before, Alex," Justin sighs. "Book Six starts, and it's like Book Five never even *happened*. And OK, for all intents and purposes, the wish that Julia made with the Crystal of Desire means that it technically *didn't* happen...because it rewound time and set everything back to exactly how it was the day before...but Alan, Julia and Sam all pretty obviously remember it. *We* remember it. I mean, how could Future Harper have written about it in the first place unless one of us told her about it, right? Maybe it didn't happen for the rest of the world, but to *us*, it's real."

"Yeah, no duh," Alex says, if only to derail his whole geeky diatribe before it can pick up steam. "What's your point, egghead?"

"My point is that Book Six opens with Alan and Ophelia seeming even more in love than ever, while he and Julia appear to be growing farther and farther apart, which is the exact *opposite* of how we left them at the end of Book Five. And it was confusing to me, because...well, *I* didn't feel that way. About either of you."

"Oh really?" Alex snorts. "Because you could have fooled me."

With a surge of bitterness, she thinks back to those first few months following the Family Vacation From Hell (as she'd referred to it both before and, somewhat less ironically, after). As soon as they'd returned home, it was as if some invisible wall had gone up between her and Justin. The friendly sibling rivalry that was always at the center of their relationship became a lot less friendly, while the closeness between them that balanced it out all but evaporated. At the time, Alex attributed it to Justin's jealousy over her having won the Wizard Competition. And though she pretended not to care—and, in truth, gave as good as she got—it still stung. *Really* stung, especially in light of everything they'd been through together, and of what she'd given up for him.

(Because, let's be honest here: she gave up her full powers so that Justin could keep his. Yeah, it meant that Max got to keep his powers in the bargain, too, but that had been just a happy side effect. She loved Max and all, sure, but c'mon, it wasn't like he was doing anything particularly important with them...)

"Yeah, well...it wasn't you I was trying to fool," Justin says, bringing her back to the present, having the good grace to look a little sheepish. "Look, the books are supposed to tell the future, right? And Book Six says Alan is deeply, head-over-heels in love with Ophelia...and that Julia is just his sister, who can barely stand him most of the time. So *of course* I played along. What else was I going to do? Who am I to change anyone's destiny, just because it's not the one I particularly want for myself?"

Alex barely contains the urge to roll her eyes at this. Because it's just so supremely Justin, to play by the rules and throw himself on the sword for "the greater good"...only to humblebrag about it later, like he deserves some kind of goddamned medal.

"Before Puerto Rico," Justin continues, oblivious, "having the books spell out our future for us was...comforting, in a way. Reassuring. It was like having a road map, one that let me prepare for every twist, every turn that was going to come our way. But I *swore* to myself that I'd never use that knowledge of future events for personal gain. That I'd let destiny play out as intended. I mean, just about everything seemed to work out OK for us in the end as it was, anyway. And who knows what might happen to the space-time continuum if I dared to interfere?"

"Yeah, yeah, Edith Keeler, butterfly effect, cosmic implications, yadda yadda yadda," Alex drones. "I've read all this already, and it bored me stupid the first time. Fast-forward to the part where it affects me."

Justin scowls at her, then shakes his head ever so slightly.

"After Puerto Rico...after that night in the rainforest, and everything that happened after...knowing the future like that was like being an inmate on Death Row, with absolutely no chance for appeal," he says, his voice going all low and gravelly. "I was condemned. Not to death, but worse: to a life of living a lie, pretending to love the girl that destiny said I should, while burying my true feelings under a shroud of deception."

"A shroud of deception?" Alex scoffs. "Christ, Justin, are you for real? Have you been reading *Twilight* on the side, or

something? Because, hi, emo much?"

Justin's eyes flare angrily, and his arms tighten around her for a split-second, but then he breathes another deep and heavy sigh. He slumps forward to rest his chin on her shoulder, and stare off into the middle distance

"You're absolutely right," he says softly.

"Wow, seriously? About you reading *Twilight*? Snkt, lemme guess, you're all up with Team Edward 'cause of your whole vampire fixa—"

"About me being 'emo', for lack of a better word," Justin cuts her off with a snarl. "It was pretty pathetic, honestly. There I was feeling sorry for myself over the future *I'd* been condemned to...when really *Juliet* was the one who was doomed."

And just like that, Alex's snarky little smirk slides right off her face, as her blood runs to ice water in her veins.

"Oh," she says quietly. "You mean...?"

Justin merely nods against her shoulder, apparently not feeling any more up to saying the T-word that's hanging in the air between them than she is.

"But then I completed my three-thousandth spell, and graduated from wizard lessons without even realizing it, because I'd spent months going through life on auto-pilot," he says. "So I chose my independent study course, and became a Junior Monster Hunter, just like Alan does in Book Six. And then *you* began talking about this new foreign dude making eyes at you in Art class, and Max separated himself from his conscience...and it was all like a slap to the face, because I knew what that meant was coming up."

"Transylvania," Alex says, finally giving voice to what they've both been thinking.

"Exactly," Justin says.

He finally drops his arms from around her and steps away towards the workbench, looking towards the flashing door of the Wizard World portal, a haunted look coming into his eyes.

"And even though I'd vowed never to alter destiny...I just couldn't let that happen to her. It was bad enough that I'd already lied to her for months, Alex. I couldn't let her throw away her youth like that for me. Not when I didn't even...didn't really..."

He trails off, then, and starts fiddling with the shattered remains of the petrified gryphon's egg she'd hurled at him, as a battle royale between guilt and sadness plays itself out across his features.

"And that's when you put up that stupid poll on your Livejournal?" Alex prompts him. "The whole free will versus destiny thing?"

"Yep. That same day we set up Frankengirl and my robot to take the fall for Juliet, and sent her to Monster Jail." Justin sighs, then winces and reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose "I was so conflicted. I thought it might help me make up my mind about what the right thing to do was. But God forbid you have an intelligent online discourse without some moron ruining it by bringing up the freaking Nazis..."

"Well, duh," Alex says. Because, after only a few short months in online fandom, even *she's* seen enough to know better than that. "Why the day we sent Frankie up the river, though?"

"Because the very next chapter after that happens in Book Six sees Ophelia enslaved by the undead lich that Alan's been assigned to capture. Which is what starts the chain of events that lead to Transylvania," Justin explains. "I knew that Juliet was bound to be kidnapped by an undead monster of some kind, and that our best chance to prevent Transylvania—for everyone's sake—was to keep it from happening. So after a lot of soul-searching—and fighting about it with idiots on the internet—I finally decided to follow my conscience, say 'damn the consequences', and try to change her future."

"But..." Alex blinks, hard, as the implications of what he's saying start to sink in. "Justin, if you'd prevented Transylvania, it wouldn't have just been *her* future you changed."

"I know," Justin says. "You wouldn't have lost Mason, either. Like I said, for *everyone's* sake, right? But as much as I like seeing you happy, Alex, you'll forgive me if keeping you together with *him* wasn't exactly my primary objective. "

"Yeah, OK," Alex says. "But after all that, Juliet still got kidnapped by the mummy anyway?"

"Yeah, well..I never said it worked, did I?" Justin chuckles bitterly. "See, the book said that Ophelia goes *with* Alan when he gets the assignment to hunt down and confront the lich, which is how they wind up getting trapped together in his lair, et cetera, etcetera...so I decided just not to tell Juliet about staking out the museum in the first place. I told her I could handle it, sent her home, and went without her. Simple, right?"

"You went after the mummy *alone*?" Alex snaps, staring at him as though he's grown a third eye on the tip of his nose. "Without any backup? Even though you knew you'd probably be trapped? What are you, *nuts*?"

"Maybe." Justin's admits with a shrug. "At least then she'd be free, and Transylvania would be averted for everyone."

"But what happened?" Alex asks. "Juliet followed you?"

"Not so much, no." Justin lets out a snort and shakes his head. "I ran into her there, if you can believe it. Completely by coincidence. Turned out she'd come to see the Egyptian exhibit on her own because she'd heard an old friend of hers was part of it."

"Oh dude, really?" Alex winces. "And then...?"

"Exactly what the book said would happen," Justin says, smiling tightly at her. "Really helped to settle that whole 'free will versus destiny' debate for me. Pretty decisively, in fact."

"Ohhhh, Justin..." Alex groans, dropping her head forward to cover her face with her palm. "You idiot, why wouldn't you tell anyone about all this? If you'd just asked Juliet to stay away from stupid the museum...or, hell, brought me and Max with you to get the drop on the Mummy in the first goddamn place..."

"I was trying to cause the smallest disruption to the space-time continuum as possible!" Justin protests, his voice pitching two octaves higher in the process. "I figured the fewer people I involved, the more contained it would be! And by the time I realized it hadn't worked, it was too late! The wheels were already in motion! And Juliet wouldn't leave!"

"Ugh!" Alex grunts. She reaches up to grind the heels of both hands into her eyes in frustration. Because *this* is classic Justin, too: taking the weight of the world on his shoulders, and trying to fix all its problems himself. Usually it's a trait she admires—if only because the problems he's fixing are usually hers, and fixing it on his own generally guarantees that Mom, Dad and/or the relevant authorities don't have to get involved—but the few times it blows up in his face? It tends to blow up huge.

"So that's why you practically dropped out of school to hunt for her day and night," she sighs, dropping her hands from her face to shake her head at him. "You were still hoping to change history and find her before Transylvania could happen."

"Ummmm...not...exactly," Justin stammers, his cheeks flushing slightly. "I mean, I did at first, sure. The book said we'd eventually find her in a ruined castle in Transylvania, so of course I searched high and low through every abandoned castle in Transylvania I could find. But...well...do you have any idea how many ruined, abandoned castles they *have* there?"

Alex purses her lips. "I'm guessing more than just the one?"

"Dozens, Alex. Possibly *hundreds*. And for those first couple days after Juliet was taken, I checked out every single one I could find. And what did I find? A few abandoned vampire nests. A couple lonely poltergeists. And one incredibly depressing *Undead Anonymous* meeting."

Alex cocks an eyebrow at this and tilts her head back. "And exactly how long did you share your feelings with them before they threw your ass out?"

"Only six and a half minutes!" Justin exclaims. "Can you believe it? They let that whiny zombie who went before me have the floor for fifteen! *Oh, woe is me, I'm sick of the taste of brains, why are there no vegan alternatives, wah wah wah!*' And their free coffee? It was *terrible!*"

Alex tries to hide her smile at this, and is only partially successful. "OK, so...Transylvania was a wash. Then what?"

"Then I...uh..." Justin licks his lips, looks away from her towards the glowing portal door, and clears his throat. "Well, then I kind of...um...gave up."

Alex's mouth drops open, even as she stares at him so hard, she feels her eyes practically bug out of her skull. "You *what*?"

"I know, I know," Justin says, holding his hands up defensively. "But listen—"

"But you don't *do* that!" Alex protests. "I give up. *Max* gives up. Half the time with him, it's not even on purpose. He just gets

distracted by a shiny object and forgets what he was doing. But you? *You* don't give up! Even when *you* think it's a bad idea to keep going, *you keep going!* It's one of the many annoying things about you that's always made me wonder if you're adopted!"

"Alex, I'd already tried to fight destiny once, and lost," Justin says. "Trying to circumvent it a second time hadn't gone any better. Even armed with all the foreknowledge that Future Harper's books had given me, I'd failed. By that point, I was convinced that our future was on rails, with no chance of changing tracks. And that future—Book Six—said that I wasn't going to find Juliet on my own, no matter how far I looked, or how hard I tried."

"But...the books say Alan searches high and low for Ophelia, don't they?" Alex asks, with a confused frown. "And mom and dad said you were falling asleep in class...and you were always wearing your Monster Hunter uniform..."

"Not at first," Justin snorts. "Think about it: what's the very next thing Alan does after Ophelia is captured? What did *I* do?"

Completely at a loss, Alex shrugs and shakes her head. "How the hell should I know? Hi, failing History, remember?"

"I took my *Captain Jim Bob Barnyard Space Command Module* playset to have it appraised," Justin says. "And then afterwards, when I fell on it? I spent *days* trying to restore and sell it. Remember? Right around the time when Harper moved into the basement, and you were stuck in your doll house?"

Alex's brow furrows as she thinks back, memories flashing before her mind's eye. Justin bailing her out, just like old times, before the awkwardness between them in the wake of Puerto Rico. Followed by her baiting him into both an argument and a fiercely intense hug, her nipples standing at attention beneath an all-too-thin dress...

(OK, yeah, so maybe it hadn't been *just* like old times...)

"And what's the next thing I did after that?" he asks, interrupting her reverie. "I trained for a freaking marathon!"

Alex blinks at this, and purses her lips as she considers it. It was true: he *had* kind of dropped everything to enter the same race that Harper was running. For reasons she never quite got a handle on. *Despite* the vow to search for his captive vampire girlfriend non-stop, *and* never having shown any interest in running before. At the time, it had struck her as a little odd, even for Justin. But she hadn't given it much thought, preoccupied as she was with the whole 'making Harper win by magic again' thing.

"It never made sense to me why Alan swears to save Ophelia, then spends the next two chapters doing absolutely *nothing* about it," Justin grunts. "But once we got there, I understood: what was the point in even trying? I wasn't going to find her, not until you started dating your werewolf boyfriend, and he helped us track her...which only locked us into Transylvania, anyway. It was completely hopeless. No matter what I did, Juliet was doomed."

Alex's frown deepens. "So what did you do?"

"Pretended, just like I'd already been doing, ever since Puerto Rico," Justin replies. "Book Six is really sketchy about Alan's whole search for Ophelia. There's a lot of 'tell-don't-show' going on in those chapters. You see him coming and going in his Monster Hunting gear, or he'll talk about looking for her, but there aren't any scenes of him actually *doing* it. So...that's kind of what *I* did. From Harper's perspective, it probably did seem like I was really looking for her."

"But then why were you falling asleep in class? What were you doing instead?"

Justin shrugs. "Writing angsty fic. Reading some. Alternating between beating myself up for not being able to change history for everyone, and feeling sorry for myself for being put in the position of having to try in the first place. Taking Max out on a few wild goose chases that I knew wouldn't pan out, to assuage his guilt over having set the mummy loose in the first place. But mostly...mostly I was avoiding you."

Alex jerks in surprise, as if he's thrown something at her, for a change. "Avoiding *me*? Why?"

"Why do you think?" Justin asks, his eyes cast downwards towards the floor. "You were busy falling in love with Mason at the time. And as much as I knew it was only temporary, it still kind of...well...really, really sucked."

Alex frowns at him. "I'm sorry."

Justin looks up at her in surprise, one corner of his lips quirked upwards in a little half-smile. "Don't you mean you're 'rhymes with Laurie'?"

Alex lets out a breath and tilts her head to one side. "No, Justin, I really mean it. I'm—"

"Alex, it's OK. Really. You couldn't have known. Heck, I didn't *want* you to know. And besides, even if you *had* known back

then, it wouldn't have...I mean *you* wouldn't have..."

Justin trails off, his eyes focussing inwards for a moment, the way they do when he's searching for just the right words to describe what he's thinking.

"I've always known that this was something you really had to come to on your *own* terms, if you were ever going to come around at all," he says finally. "I don't think it could have worked any other way."

"Well, yeah," Alex replies, as though this is the most plainly obvious observation that anybody's ever made in the history of time. "It's like the old saying goes, egghead: you can *lead* a horse to sibcest, but you can't make it—"

"Stop. Right. There," Justin cuts her off, grimacing as though he's going to be sick. "Look, can the two of us, right now, please agree to a permanent embargo on the use of the 'i' word, and all its equally unpalatable fandom permutations? It really makes me uncomfortable."

"Stop using words like 'embargo', 'unpalatable' and 'permutation', and maybe I'll think about it, dork," Alex shoots back, her snarky grin having returned. She flops back down onto the brown recliner, coughing a little at the cloud of dust it throws up into the air, and proceeds to examine her nails on her right hand.

"So I guess it's not like *Back to the Future* after all, then, huh?" she says. "Knowing what's coming...all that reading and studying and analyzing the books like you did...it doesn't make a damn bit of difference. It all just happens anyway, whether we want it to or not."

"That's certainly how it *looked*, anyway," Justin says, lowering himself down onto the red vinyl bench across from her. "I know *I'd* given up hope of trying."

"Boy, don't you feel stupid then," Alex snorts. "I told you we might as well just wait for the movie."

"Alex, pay attention: I said that's how it *looked*." Justin sits forward to rest his elbows on his knees, and steeple the tips of his fingers together. "Because here's the thing: ever since Transylvania? There's been this...this weird gap...where nothing strange has happened to us that corresponds to the books."

Alex tears her attention away from her manicure to blink at him. "Nothing strange? Really? Are you kidding me?" She gestures back and forth from him, to herself, and back again. "What do you call this, then? *Normal*?"

"I meant that in the magical sense," Justin says, his face flushing a little. "But you do make a good point. Up until now, the books have been an almost day-to-day retelling of our lives since Max's powers came in. But ever since the big Homecoming game, where I scored three three-pointers in one quarter? Nada."

"Ugh. You're just gonna keep on mentioning that game every five seconds for the rest of our lives, aren't you?"

Justin flushes even darker, and presses his lips together in a tight, thin line.

"The *point*, Alex," he says, in his overly-patient, 'my sister is an idiot' voice, "is that this whole...online thing between us...never gets mentioned in the books. Doesn't even get *hinted* at, between the lines, like...like some of the other stuff was. *Nothing* that's happened to us over the past couple months does. And when the very next chapter picks up? Alan and Zack are running against each other to be elected student body president, which can't possibly even *happen* midway through senior year!"

"Um, sure," Alex says, having paid about as much attention to the timing of student council elections as she did to ...well, pretty much anything else involving school. "If you say so."

"There's been other little telltale signs, too," Justin said, talking faster by the second, his eyes gleaming with excitement, now. "For instance, have you noticed how close Zeke and Harper have been getting lately?"

"Well, yeah..." Alex lazily shrugs one shoulder. "But they get together in the books anyway, don't they? Zayley Forever, right?"

"Yes, but not until much *later*!" Justin exclaims. "Julia plays matchmaker and gets Zack and Hayley to work together during the annual science fair, then casts a spell on them so that sparks fly between them. But the science fair isn't for months! And judging by the fact that nothing horrible has happened to either of them, I'm guessing you haven't used magic."

"Hey! It's not like something horrible happens every single time I use—" Alex breaks off as Justin cocks his head to one side and glares at her, then huffs and crosses her arms under her breasts. "Yeah, yeah, so clearly I haven't used magic on them."

"Exactly!" Justin grins, pointing at her excitedly. "They're falling for each other of their own free will, way ahead of schedule,

and without any of your meddling!"

"Well, I *did* trick them into doing work for me, together. So I'd like to think I'm still *partly* responsible for them being together forever, thank you very much!" Alex pouts. "I still think Sayley would be cuter, though."

Justin's brow furrows in confusion. "Wait, what?"

"Never mind," Alex sighs, dismissing the notion with a wave of her hand. "OK, I get it, things in our lives have stopped lining up exactly with what happens in the books. So what, egghead?"

"So it occurred to me that maybe we've managed to jump off the track, somehow," Justin says. "That by starting this whole...online thing...that maybe we knocked ourselves into an AU...er, that is, an alternate uni—"

"I know what an AU is!" Alex snaps. "God, why does everyone insist on dumbing things down for me? Who am I, Max?"

"Woah-kay then!" Justin says, holding his hands up defensively, before she can reach for something heavy. "OK, so I had a hypothesis..."

"Ugh, I said 'stop dumbing things down', Justin, not 'start speaking Nerd.'"

"...and the next step in the scientific method is to subject it to a test, right? Right. So, to test it, I decided to—"

"—to tell mom and dad that I was planning to do something stupid to try and get Mason back," Alex cuts him off, her eyes going wide as she finally gets where he's been going with all this. "So they'd call me on it and try to stop me."

Justin grins at her sheepishly, and winces a little, his own eyes crinkling a little at the corners. "Um, more or less?"

"Seriously, Justin?" Alex growls as she stands up out of the chair, her small hands gathering themselves into fists at her sides. "You threw me under the bus to *test a theory*?"

"It had to be something significant!" Justin says, his voice cracking as it rises an octave. "Something that would decisively alter the course of future events! And this struck me as being an obvious turning point!"

"Oh. A turning point. I see," Alex repeats in a low voice. She cocks one eyebrow at him, and walks slowly towards him, fists still clenched. "Look, I'll admit that I just skimmed the books before, and that I kind of lost interest and stopped paying attention after...well, let's be honest, Book One...but isn't there *also* something in there about Julia pretending to join some kind of rebellion against the Wizard World, so she can single-handedly take it down?"

"Uh..." Justin gapes at her, clearly not having anticipated the question. "Yes, but..."

"So wouldn't tipping Mom and Dad off to that be even *more* significant?" Alex asks.

"Er, maybe," Justin stammers, "but I...didn't know what...greater...repercussions...interfering with that...might have on the...Wizard World as a whole...so..."

"God, you are *such* a terrible liar," Alex sneers, shaking her head sharply. She continues to advance on him, as Justin—clearly fearing for his safety—rears away from her, all but crawling up onto the workbench behind him. "Why don't you just admit that you saw your one shot at keeping me from getting back together with Mason, and you took it?"

"What? No!" Justin says, in that breathy, scandalized voice that—look, let's just call a spade a spade, here—always turns her on. "This was a wholly objective, entirely scientific approach to—"

"Tell me what is it I'm supposed to do, exactly," Alex growls, cutting him off again in mid-nerd rant. "Now."

Justin cringes, and leans as far away from her as humanly possible, as though afraid she might hit him again. "Offer to trade our portal to hillbilly wizards in exchange for the secret to turning Mason human again," he replies automatically.

"Wow, really?" Alex says, stopping short barely a foot away from him. "And does it work?"

Justin's face falls, and his entire body uncoiling itself as he faces her, a portrait of stunned disbelief. "Alex, you wouldn't...!"

"Gotcha!" Alex grins, then hurls herself bodily at him, enveloping him in a bear hug, even as he tries to flinch away from her. Impulsively, she stands up on tiptoe and kisses him lightly on the cheek, then lowers herself back down onto her heels and pillows her head against his chest. And as he realizes she doesn't mean to pulverize him, she feels him start to relax in her arms, and hears his heartbeat gradually begin to slow. After a second, he even wraps his arms around her again, in a tentative-if-

awkward embrace of his own, as though he's not quite sure how to do this now that things between them are...changing.

"What was that for?" he asks, his voice a little shaky.

"For caring enough to try and change my future without my say-so after all, you self-serving, know-it-all dork." Alex says, her voice muffled a little by his shirt. "Duh."

"Um...OK," Justin says, clearly confused. "You're...welcome, then, I guess?"

"I *knew* it," Alex giggles. "I *knew* you were jealous."

"I wasn't jealous," Justin insists, as his arms tighten around her a little. "Jealousy equals possessiveness. Mason was jealous. I was merely...concerned."

"Oh, whatever. You were so jealous."

They stand like there for a long, quiet moment, just the two of them, with only the faint magical hum of the portal and their own breathing to break the silence between them.

"So you really think we've jumped the track, or whatever?" Alex asks then, because she's never been particularly good with long, quiet moments. "That things might turn out differently for us than they do for Julia and Alan in the books?"

"Well, we still don't have enough evidence to say for certain...but I really hope so."

"Good," Alex nods against his chest. "Because I don't *want* to trade the portal to get Mason back, or take on a Wizard revolution, or any of that other stuff. I just...I just want *this*. Whatever the hell *this* is."

"Me too, Alex," Justin says, as he rests his chin on the top of her head, and lets out a sigh of his own. "I guess only time will tell."

And OK, so maybe that isn't the conviction she's looking for, and maybe his sigh sounds a little more 'concerned' than 'contented', but that's just Justin being the big, over-thinking dork that he is, right? Because as far as Alex is concerned, right now everything is right with the world. Well, aside from the whole 'grounded for life' thing, but there's always ways around that. What else is magic for, after all?

Alex squeezes him so tightly that he grunts in pain, then lets out a contented little sigh of her own. Yeah, everything's gonna be *just* fine.

Author's Note, the second: And *that's* how you make plot holes, wild shifts in characterization, and poorly-structured story arcs in canon work for you, kids. (Why yes, I *do* have issues with the writing in the third season! Why do you ask?) Seriously, though, those two episodes they aired out of order *right* after Juliet disappears? They have *always* bugged me.

This isn't the first time I've taken a run at trying to explain away the (many glaring) inconsistencies that abound in the Season 3, by the way. Though it's not related to *OTP* at all, my other multi-chapter Jalex story ***Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger*** is an alternate look at the Monster Hunter/Werewolf arc that mostly takes place 'between the scenes', and I'm quite proud of how it turned out. If this chapter piqued your interest at all, you may want to check it out. (Word of warning: although the majority of the story is a strong T-rating at best, it earns its M-rating in the second-to-last chapter in a big bad way. If you're more of a 'fade to black' mindset when it comes to love scenes, you may want to just skim that one to get the gist.)

Thanks again, everybody. Hope this chapter was worth the wait!